# MANACLED

BOOK TWO

*by senlinyu*

*Flashback 1*

**Three years earlier.**

**March 2002. Nearly six years after the death of Albus Dumbledore.**

Hermione's teeth ground with frustration as she bottled antidote potions. She'd just gotten out of another pointless Order meeting.

Sometimes she wondered if she were the only one aware that they were losing the war. As she shelved the new bottles, she tucked a few into her pocket and hurried into the next room where Madam Pomfrey was bustling around. The hospital ward occupying the second floor of Grimmauld Place was eerily silent. No one currently in the room had an easily healed injury. Lee Jordan was lying in one bed. There was brain matter still oozing from his ears, drop by drop. Hermione had figured out a way to cancel the curse but the counter-charm was slow-acting. She could only hope the dripping would stop within the next hour. It was doubtful his mental function would recover. The brain damage was severe and irreparable. She wasn't sure of the precise extent of it. She had to wait until he woke up.

If he woke up.

Most likely, assuming he wasn't completely brain dead by the time the dripping ceased, the Order would have to make a run to drop him at St Mungo's when they could spare someone. George Weasley was seated in a bed beside his friend. He was pale with pain and despair. He had been hit in the right thigh with a fast acting necrosis curse. By the time he had been able to overcome the pain and apparate back, the rot had spread all the way up to his hip. There was no countercurse for necrosis. Hermione had barely managed to avoid his vital organs as she'd had to cut it off of him. She hadn't even had a spare second to stop and knock him out. His hands were still shaking, no matter how many calming draughts and pain potions Hermione administered to him. Katie Bell lay in a bed in the far corner. Sleeping. She would hopefully be released soon. Some nastily creative Death Eater had conjured a porcupine inside her chest. The quills had shredded and mangled the girl's lungs and stomach and only miraculously not stopped her heart. She had nearly drowned in blood before Hermione and Madam Pomfrey had managed to banish the creature and stabilise her. Katie had been there for three weeks. While mostly recovered, her entire torso was still covered in a multitude of tiny round scars. Her breathing made a faint rattling sound when she moved. Hermione went over and poured an antivenin potion down Seamus Finnegan's throat. He'd fallen into a pit of vipers and gotten bitten thirty-six times before he managed to apparate out. It was only because of wizarding folk's immunity to non-magical injuries that he had managed to make it back to them before he had died.

There were a dozen other bodies in the hospital ward, but Hermione didn't know the names of those Resistance fighters, and they were too injured to tell her.

Standing in the room looking over the silent, injured bodies, Hermione felt lost. She had just come

from another meeting in which she'd urged the Order to start using more effective curses when fighting. She'd been shot down. Yet again. There was a bizarre sort of optimism among many of the Order members that they could somehow win the War without utilising the dark arts. Most of the Resistance fighters still defaulted to stunning or petrifying when cornered, as though the Death Eaters couldn't cancel those hexes in a few seconds and then appear at the next skirmish to horribly kill or maim someone. There were a few who had begun using more vicious spells. Mostly the ones who had been on the receiving end of a curse that nearly killed them. It was like a poorly kept secret within the Resistance ranks; everyone turned a blind eye to it, pretending that it weren't the case. Every time Hermione appeared at a high level Order meeting, she laid out the case for why all the fighters needed to be taught more effective magic to duel with. Every time she found herself being given disbelieving looks. Apparently being on "the Light" side required that they fight against completely stacked odds. Never mind that their enemies wanted to kill them all, and then murder and enslave all Muggles in Europe. Apparently that was still an insufficient reason to kill Death Eaters in self-defence.

The response she got each time was the same. She was a healer, didn't she know how using dark curses eventually corrupted a person? If Order and Resistance members made the personal choice to use those kinds of spells it was their decision. The Order would never require it of anyone. Never teach it to anyone. Besides, someone would always blandly point out to Hermione, she hardly even knew what it was like to be out there in a battlefield facing the choice of ending someone else's life. She was always back at Grimmauld Place acting as a healer, Potion Mistress, and researcher for the Order. That was where they needed her. She needed to let the people specialised in combat be the ones to make decisions about the war strategies. It was enough to make Hermione want to scream. As she stood beside Lee Jordan, seething, she heard a grating tap of wood on the ground and turned to find Mad-Eye Moody entering the room. He looked straight at her. "Granger, a word," he said. Steeling herself she turned to follow him down the hall. She hoped she wasn't about to be scolded yet again for having the audacity to question the Order's war strategy. She didn't imagine Mad-Eye would; he was one of the few Order members who didn't disagree. Moody led the way to a small room, and once they were inside it he turned and cast a series of complex and powerful privacy spells. Once he finished he looked around the room carefully. His magical eye was spinning as he scrutinized every corner. After a minute he looked down at her. He seemed oddly tense, even for a man who barked "Constant vigilance," more often than he said anything else. He seemed uncomfortable. "We're losing the war," he said after a moment. "I know," Hermione said in a leaden voice. "Sometimes I feel like I'm the only person aware of that." "Some people—can only fight fueled by optimism," Moody said slowly. "But—we're running out of optimism." Hermione just kept staring at him. She didn't need him to tell her that. She knew. She was the one who had to hold people down as they died in agony from curses she couldn't reverse. Who had to then walk into a debriefing room and list the dead and the injured, detailing how long recovery was expected to take and whether those people could be expected to fight again when it was completed. "An opportunity has come up," Moody said in a low voice. He was studying her face carefully. "One that could turn the tide of the war." Hermione didn't have any reserves of hope left within her to brighten at those words. Based on the context in which Moody was speaking to her, she suspected the price of it was steep enough to be questionable.

"Oh?" "As Voldemort's forces have grown, Severus's intelligence has grown limited. He's primarily kept researching and developing new curses with Dolohov. They don't inform him of attack strategies." Hermione nodded. She had noticed that over the last several months. Some of the

other Order members had taken it as an opportunity to begin questioning Snape's loyalty once again.

"We have an opportunity to bring in a new spy. Someone with a high rank in Voldemort's army is willing to turn for us." Hermione stared at Moody skeptically. "Someone highly ranked wants to turn now?" "Conditionally," Moody clarified. "The Malfoy boy. Says he'll turn spy to avenge his mother. With the assurance of a full-pardon and—" he hesitated. "And he wants you. Now and after the war." Hermione stood stunned. If Moody had just cursed her she couldn't have been more astonished.

"Severus thinks the offer is legitimate. Says Malfoy had some kind of fascination with you in school. There's nothing to indicate the offer was made under orders."

Hermione barely registered the words as she stood reeling internally.

She hadn't seen Malfoy since school.

Sixth year had barely begun when he started war by assassinating Dumbledore and then fleeing. She would hear about him occasionally when Severus gave updates on Voldemort's military structure. Malfoy had been climbing rank steadily over the years.

Why would Malfoy turn? The blame for the war could be legitimately placed on his shoulders. There was no plausible reason for such a late switch in alliance.

Perhaps Voldemort's power wasn't as assured as they had thought. Perhaps the ranks were beginning to break. It seemed too good to be true.

But why want her?

She didn't recall their school rivalry being anything to write home about. He had always paid far more attention to bullying Harry than her. She had always been more of a footnote; an added insult because she was a Muggle-born. She'd never been the true target of his viciousness.

Unless...demanding her was some sort of revenge on Harry. Maybe he thought she and Harry were together. Bastard. She stood there thinking until Moody spoke again. "There's not much I wouldn't do for the intelligence he could offer. But you have to agree. He wants you willing." No. No. Never.

She swallowed the refusal. Her hands fisted until she could feel the outlines of her metacarpal bones beneath the skin.

"I'll do it," she said, not letting her voice waver. "Provided he doesn't do anything to interfere with my ability to aid the Order. I'll do it." Moody studied her carefully.

"You should think about it more. You can have a few days. If you do this—you can't tell anyone. Not until after the war. Not Potter, or Weasley, or anyone else. Kingsley, Severus, Minerva and I will be the only Order members aware of it." Hermione looked up at him steadily. There was a sensation in her chest as though something inside her were shriveling and dying, but she didn't let herself attend to it. "I don't need more time to think," she said sharply. "I realise what's being asked. The sooner we get the information the better. I'm not delaying that so I can have time to mull over or dread a decision I've already made." Moody nodded sharply. "Then I'll send word you agreed." Removing the wards from the door, Moody tramped out; leaving Hermione alone to absorb what she'd consented to. She wasn't sure what she felt.

Like crying. That was her most immediate desire.

It felt as though Moody had dropped the war on her shoulders. But also—hope—maybe. Insomuch as it was possible to feel hopeful after essentially agreeing to sell herself to a Death Eater as his war prize. Hermione hadn't felt hopeful in a long while. Somehow, up until Dumbledore died and even for a bit afterward, she had thought the war would be simple and short. Harry had escaped death so many times in school. He, Ron, and she had beaten so many impossible odds. So, she had thought that being clever, being good—that friendship, and bravery, and the power of Love were enough to win the war. But they weren't. Being clever wasn't enough. The goodness in her was being ground to dust under the weight of all those lives lost or ruined with nothing to show for it yet. Friendship didn't stop someone from dying screaming in agony. Bravery didn't win a battle when your enemy had a multitude of methods for removing you permanently from the war, and you were trying to beat them with petrification hex. Love hadn't yet defeated Voldemort's hate.

Every day the war stretched on seemed to make the odds shrink a bit more. Harry was breaking under the pressure and guilt. He was so thin and exhausted she was afraid he'd crack any day. He kept withdrawing, further and further into himself. The death of Dumbledore so shortly after the loss of Sirius seemed to have knocked him off kilter in a way he never fully recovered from. Every death and injury among his friends seemed to prod him a little closer to a precipice she wasn't sure he could come back from. Harry was clinging to the hope that somehow the war would end in such a way that life could be normal afterward. It was that impossible belief that continued to carry him forward. He was the one who insistented most adamantly that the Order and the Resistance never use dark magic. If they did that, he argued, there would be no going back. They'd be tainted by it for the rest of their lives. No better than the Death Eaters.

So Hermione was forced to watch the Order and most of the Resistance side with him. And then watch their friends die in her hospital ward. They were relying on Harry. If he despaired, he'd break altogether and give up. The Order was in desperate need of an edge. A bit of information. To know before a raid hit. Where vulnerabilities lay. Anything. Malfoy could give them that. He'd been personally trained by his Aunt Bellatrix before she'd died alongside his mother. He'd climbed high. Now he'd made an offer they couldn't refuse.

That *she* couldn't refuse. Clearly he knew, acting like a king demanding a tribute. Because he was fascinated with her... She mulled over it. If Severus hadn't corroborated it, she would never believe such a thing. To avenge his mother. For a pardon. For her, both now and after the war. Which was the true motive? Were any of them? Or was there another angle he was playing? His mother had been dead for over a year, in a freak accident alongside Bellatrix Lestrange when a Death Eater tried to stop Harry and Ron from escaping Lestrange Manor. It wasn't really either side's fault that she had died. If her death had ended Malfoy's allegiance, it would have happened then. Not a year later. Not after he'd used the void his aunt left to climb into an even higher position of power. However—wanting a pardon seemed odd. Unless there were some incredible odds she wasn't aware of, the likelihood that the Order could win seemed slim at best. So, because of her? Perhaps he had hated her more than she had known. Or lusted— She shuddered with revulsion, and tried to shove the thought away before catching herself and forcing herself to stop and consider it. If wanting her was his motivation...the opportunity rested on more than merely her consent. Once he'd had her once, or maybe a few times—if it was just fueled by revenge—he'd get tired of her. Perhaps it was just a game to him. Play spy for a little bit, get a chance to bring her to her knees. Knowing she'd crawl for him if it meant saving Harry. Saving the Order. And then—once he had what he

wanted—he'd turn back. Cast her aside and watch them all die. Her throat contracted, and she felt like she might be sick. She forced away her horror and ignored the wrenching, twisting sensation in the pit of her stomach.

She had to find a way to fascinate him. To hold his attention and interest.

Would it even be possible? She drifted out of the room, feeling frozen, and went back to the hospital ward. The room was still silent. "Poppy, do you need me right now? Or is it alright if I go out?" she asked quietly. "Of course, dear. You should go rest. You've been on your feet for twelve hours now," Pomfrey told her gently. "If anything happens I'll call for you."

Hermione fidgeted the bracelet on her wrist. It carried a protean charm that the Order used to summon her to the safe houses where she was most urgently needed.

She left the hospital ward and headed up to her room. She had no intention of resting. She went and changed into fresh clothes, and then went out to the front steps and apparated away. The wizarding world didn't have what she needed. She made her way to the nearest Waterstones. She browsed through the sections. Picking out books; from the philosophy section, from the psychology section, from the relationship section, and the history section until she had a large armful. The female clerk who rang up pile quirked an eyebrow as she scanned the titles. Several histories and biographies of concubines and female spies; a thick guide to sex; The Art of War by Sun Tzu; The Art of Worldly Wisdom by Baltasar Gracian; The Prince by Machiavelli. Influence: Science and Practice by Robert Cialdini; a book on body language. It was an admittedly odd selection. "They're for a uni essay," Hermione lied impulsively, feeling the need to explain herself.

"A few of them will be handy for personal use too, I reckon." The clerk gave her a saucy wink as she put the books into a bag. Hermione felt herself blush, but forced herself to laugh. "Well, I am buying them," she quipped, but the words tasted like sand in her mouth. "If you come by again you'll have to let me know this essay goes over with your tutor. And whether any of these end up useful for extracurricular activities." Hermione nodded awkwardly as she paid and carried the bag out of the store. McGonagall's face had flashed before her eyes at the girl's words. Minerva knew too. But Moody had been the one chosen to speak to Hermione. She wondered why. She felt slightly ill as she looked at the selection of books she now owned. She wanted a cup of tea. Well, actually she wanted to crawl into a hole and die there, but tea was her second choice.

She found a shop nearby and fished out the book whose title least unsettled her while she waited. "*Work toward your goals—indirectly as well as directly. Life is a struggle against human malice, in which wisdom comes to grips with the strategy of design. The latter never does what is indicated; in fact, it aims to deceive. The fanfare is in the light but the execution is in the dark, the purpose being always to mislead. Intention is revealed to divert the attention of the adversary, then it is changed to gain the end by what was unexpected. But insight is wise, wary, and waits behind its armor. Sensing always the opposite of what it was to sense and recognizing at once the real purpose of the trick, it allows every first hint to pass, lies in wait for a second, and even a third. The simulation of truth now mounts higher by glossing the deception and tries, through truth itself to falsify. It changed the play in order to change the trick and makes the reason appear the phantom by founding the greatest fraud upon the greatest candor. But wariness is on watch seeing clearly what is intended, covering the darkness that was clothed in light, and recognizing that design most artful which looks most artless. In such fashion, the wiliness of Python is matched against the simplicity of Apollo's penetrating rays."* Hermione gnawed her lip as she poured herself a cup of tea and contemplated

Malfoy again. Her hand wandered up to her throat and she nervously played with the chain of her necklace, twisting it in loops around her fingers.

Then she rummaged through her bag and used her wand surreptitiously to transfigure her quill and parchment into a pen and a small notebook. The notebook was crammed with notes by the time her pot of tea was empty. As she stuffed the books into her expanded satchel, she reconsidered the situation in which she found herself. She could not walk into it with any assumptions. If she did she would likely overlook something. After nearly six years as a Death Eater, Malfoy was likely a highly accomplished manipulator. Severus' reports on the goings on of Voldemort's inner circle indicated that it was a ruthless political environment. Voldemort was a cruel master, and unsparing in his punishments. Death Eaters had little loyalty to one another. They were eager to cut down those ahead of them if it helped secure their own places or access greater power and protection for themselves. Malfoy's offer could easily all be a ploy to climb even higher. To become a double agent for Voldemort in the same way that Snape acted as one for the Order. To feed them false information at a crucial point that could lead to their downfall. However Severus was supporting the idea, apparently of the opinion that Malfoy's offer was legitimate. She would have to speak to him. She wanted to know exactly what he had noticed to believe it. She slipped into an alleyway and apparated back to Grimmauld Place. As she made her way up to her room she noticed Lavender Brown leaving the room Ron shared with Harry and Fred. Ron and Lavender weren't exactly in a relationship per se. Ron had about five girls that he cycled through based on availability following missions and skirmishes. The War had made him angrier and more tense. He was constantly on edge as he strategised raids and skirmishes. His talent for wizard's chess had translated into a talent for war strategy. He tended to take every casualty as his personal responsibility. If he wasn't shagging someone, he tended toward explosive bouts of rage. Everyone had different coping mechanisms. Neville Longbottom and Susan Bones smoked so much boomslang in the attic they reeked of it even after a smoke banishing and freshening charm had been applied to them.

Hannah Abbott bit her nails until they bled.

Charlie had a hip flask that Hermione suspected had an undetectable expansion charm on it given how his poison of the day never seemed to run dry. Harry smoked cigarettes, and habitually found his way into underground muggle fight clubs. Hermione hesitated in the hallway, staring after Lavender for a moment before going over and knocking lightly on the door to the bedroom. "It's open!" Ron called. Hermione peeked in and found Ron pulling on a shirt. "Everything alright?" he inquired. "Yes," she said awkwardly. "I was just—wondering if you could tell me about what happened when the Lestrange Manor burned down. I was doing some spell research. It was fiendfyre wasn't it?"

Ron gave her an odd look.

"That was a while ago. But yeah, after Harry and I got caught by those snatchers. I got him on the face with a stinging hex so they didn't recognize him right off. They took us to Bellatrix, and her sister was there too. They sent off for Malfoy to come identify Harry before they called Voldemort. But, before he got there, Luna had got word back to the Order and she, Moody, Tonks, and Charlie showed up on that dragon and smashed right through the bloody window." He ran his fingers through his hair and Hermione noticed with a pang that it had streaks of grey in it. "Anyway, it was just nuts after that. Spells were flying and Crabbe, I think, tried to stop us with a fiendfyre curse and lost control of it. He was always an idiot. It burned down the whole place in minutes. We probably

would have all been killed if not for Charlie's dragon. But—we couldn't grab Luna. She was too far away... one of the fire chimaeras swallowed her." As he spoke Ron expression grew far away and haunted.

"And that's how Bellatrix and Narcissa died too?" Hermione prodded casually. "Yeah. They probably could've apparated out of the Manor if they'd realised in time. But Crabbe was standing right behind them when he cast. It hit them first, which is probably why he lost control. Probably freaked when he realized how fucked he'd be for killing Bellatrix." "Probably," Hermione said nodding. "Fiendfyre is not a joke, Hermione." Ron was staring at her seriously. "I know you're always going on about wanting the Order to start using more dangerous spells, but just because it's not dark magic doesn't make it any less serious. If you're going to try to push for using fiendfyre on a battlefield, I'm going to be the first to shut you down." Hermione pressed her lips together and her grip on the knob tightened until it rattled faintly. She eased her hold quickly.

"I'm not an idiot, Ronald. I just need ashwinder eggs for potion making and I'm trying to decide what the best fire spell will be." It was a ridiculous lie, but it had been years since Ron had brewed a potion.

"Oh. Well—probably not fiendfyre." She nodded sharply in agreement. "Well, I've got some more research to do then," she said, and withdrew from the bedroom. As she pushed open the door to her own room Harry and Ginny sprang apart looking guilty. "Sorry," Hermione apologized. "Am I interrupting something?" "No," Harry said quickly. "I was just asking Gin for more details about that mission she and Dean got back from." He left the room quickly. Hermione eyed Ginny. "Mission details?" Ginny blushed. "We were just talking. He still—won't. He just—comes to talk sometimes." Harry and Ginny had been dancing around each other for years. Their interest was obvious, but Harry refused to get into a relationship. He said it was too dangerous. That it would paint a target on Ginny's back. But anytime Ginny dated anyone else, Harry's tendency to sneak out into muggle London and return home with missing teeth, a broken nose, split knuckles, as well as fractured eye sockets and ribs tended dramatically increase. Ginny hadn't dated anyone in over a year. Like a black hole, her availability seemed to drag Harry in toward her. He couldn't seem to keep away from her but he also couldn't bring himself to acknowledge his interest. "Well, at least he's talking to you," Hermione murmured. Hermione and Harry had—drifted apart. Her urging about using dark magic was seen as a lack of confidence in him and Dumbledore. Possibly even a betrayal, although neither Harry nor Ron would actually use the word. Every time she said anything on the subject of using the dark arts he'd barely speak to her for days. She shoved the thought away. She couldn't think about it. She had far too much to consider already.

*Flashback 2*

**March 2002**

Hermione pored over the books she'd bought during every spare minute she had. She transfigured them to resemble texts about arithmancy, ancient runes, and healing, and no one even blinked to find her plowing through them while brewing, during the quiet moments in the hospital ward, or during meals.

She wasn't sure if any of the information would actually be useful, but she was completely at a loss as to how else to prepare. Books were the only resource she had. So she read and brain-stormed and worried, and found herself snapping defensively at people.

"I'm sorry, Fred," she said, wincing when he stopped by to visit George. He had tried to lighten the mood by recommending she provide a naughty nurse routine while caring for his brother. Hermione, abruptly finding the subject matter sensitive, exploded at him and nearly slapped him across the face.

She looked away. "I just—I haven't been sleeping much lately."

It was a pathetic excuse.

No one was sleeping much and hadn't in a long time.

No matter the safe house, there were always a few people up at any hour; playing cards, smoking, and doing anything else to while away the long night hours.

Harry was almost always among the insomniacs. He seemed to exist on an impossibly insufficient amount of sleep. He wasn't even sure anymore if the nightmares were Voldemort or just his own stress and guilt. When he'd start walking into walls and standing and staring blankly off into space, Hermione would drag him into the hospital ward and dose him with dreamless sleep.

Hermione had her own nightmares, mostly of Harry and Ron dying while she tried and failed to save them.

The faces of the dead haunted her too.

All the people she hadn't been quick enough; hadn't been clever enough; hadn't been skilled enough to save.

Colin Creevey often appeared in her dreams.

Colin had been the first person who died under Hermione's care. It was shortly after Voldemort seized the Ministry, before the Order had been forced to abandon Hogwarts. Madam Pomfrey had stepped out to buy new potions when Colin was rushed in. Harry had been there, keeping Hermione company during what had been a quiet afternoon.

Colin had been struck by a flaying curse. There was no countercurse for it.

Hermione couldn't knock Colin out. The curse forced him to stay conscious. Stupefy. Dreamless sleep. Even Draught of Living Death. None of it worked. The curse tore through and kept him conscious. Hermione tried everything she could think of to reverse it. To slow it. To stall it. The skin kept cutting away. Colin kept screaming. If she restored the skin somewhere, it flayed itself again. If she didn't replace the skin the curse moved deeper. Into the muscle and tissue.

The curse didn't stop until it reached his bones.

Colin Creevey died surrounded by a pile of wafer-thin layers of his flesh and a pool of blood while Hermione sobbed and tried everything she could think of to save him.

He'd been a perfectly excised skeleton when Madam Pomfrey returned.

Hermione never recovered from it.

She didn't smoke, didn't drink, didn't pick fights, didn't have casual sex. She just worked harder and longer. She didn't have time to grieve or regret. There was always a new body being brought to her and she had no time to second guess herself.

She slept when she was too exhausted to dream.

She stared up at Fred. "It's just a bad day."

He gave a tight smile. "It's all right, Mione, you're entitled to have them like the rest of us. Honestly, I can't for the life of me understand how you keep doing this."

Hermione turned and looked around the infirmary feeling helpless.

"If I didn't—who would?"

The Order relied upon her being there.

It wasn't a sentiment born from an inflated opinion. It was simply a fact. At that point in the war, Hermione was more specialised in healing dark magic and curses than anyone else in most of Britain.

When Voldemort had taken over the Ministry of Magic, the Order had been forced to stop going to St Mungo's. Any Resistance members sent to the hospital were immediately arrested on terrorism charges and then disappeared into Voldemort's prisons.

The Ministry takeover had been carefully timed. The first law enacted was the Muggle-born Registration Act. Voldemort understood the vital role healing played in a war and so St Mungo's was the first place purged under the new law. All the Muggle-born and half-blood healers were quickly arrested and had their wands snapped before they could flee to the Order.

Poppy Pomfrey suddenly became one of the Resistance's most broadly experienced Healers. Hermione had been apprenticed under her and studying intensively since Dumbledore's death. When European Healers sympathetic to the Resistance had secretly reached out and offered training, Hermione had been the only person with enough healing knowledge to qualify that the Order could afford to spare.

She had left everyone behind. Said her goodbyes and been smuggled across Europe from hospital to hospital to learn as much advanced healing magic as she could. She returned after almost two years

when their hospital was compromised during a battle and all the healers they had recruited were killed along with Horace Slughorn. Severus had trained Hermione in potions until she'd left and she'd continued her studies as they related to healing during her training throughout Europe. When she returned, Hermione was both a fully trained emergency Healer and medical Potioneer. Her specialty was deconstructing curses in order to develop counter-spells.

The first counter-curse she invented was for the flaying curse.

With Voldemort's curse development division constantly debuting new experimental spells during every battle, the need for her was desperate.

Hermione trained as many Resistance members in healing as were willing to learn. Unfortunately, healing magic was a precise and highly subtle art. It required tremendous attention and devotion to achieve success. The Order tried to include at least one person with field healing abilities in every skirmish in order to try to keep fighters alive long enough to get back to the infirmary. But, because of the high demand to deploy them, field healers were overworked and had the Order's highest fatality rates.

Most fighters preferred to spend their free time drilling more defensive magic rather than believe they'd need to know anything more than basic magical first aid. The stubborn optimism it revealed made Hermione shake with frustration when she allowed herself to think about it.

The Order simply did not have enough people to utilise many of them well. The failures in leadership trickled down and affected the entire Resistance.

They'd been unprepared for the war. Dumbledore's death had effectively cut the legs from under them and they had been struggling to survive since then.

Malfoy had done that.

His murder of Dumbledore had crippled them. Doomed them.

Now he was trying to appear like some twisted savior, willing to staunch the wound he'd opened. Hermione hated him. More than she hated anyone but Voldemort. Antonin Dolohov, the head of the curse development division was a close third.

Malfoy had started the war, caused all the hurt and now she was required to swallow all her loathing and be—

—willing.

The dread since her initial conversation with Moody was already swallowing her.

She didn't know how to stop hating Malfoy. She didn't think she was good enough an actress to be able to pretend that she had. The thought of being in the same room with him without trying to curse him—to punish him for everything he was responsible for—she wasn't sure if she had the self-control.

Hermione gritted her teeth and pressed her forehead against a windowpane while she tried to think, trying to force herself to breathe and not break something or start crying.

She couldn't break down. She needed to compartmentalise. She needed to force all her hatred of

Malfoy into a box and keep it somewhere where it couldn't bleed out and taint all her interactions with him. She wouldn't think clearly if she were constantly seething with rage.

She needed to take a wider perspective.

Utilising his spying was more important than the short-term satisfaction of hating him.

They needed him.

Yet a part of her wanted to make him suffer. She couldn't help but hope that once she had what they needed from him, she could make him pay.

But—if they won the war as that point, the victory would be owed to him. Hermione had agreed to be the price for that. As much as she loathed him, if he saved them all, she knew she'd feel obliged to uphold her end.

No matter what it was he intended to do to her.

She suddenly felt nauseated. She was shaking, and simultaneously hot and cold.

She pulled her forehead from the glass.

Her breath had created a circle of condensation on the window.

After a moment, she reached out with a fingertip and drew the rune thurisaz: the force of destruction and defense, hardship, introspection, and focus. Beside it she drew its reversal. Its merkstave: for danger, betrayal, evil, malice, hatred, torment, and spite.

Herself.

Malfoy. She watched the runes vanish as the condensation evaporated back into the air.

She turned back to her books.

Moody found her that evening. "We have a time and location."

"Where?"

"Forest of Dean. Friday. Eight in the evening. I'll scout it and apparate you to the address the first time."

Hermione nodded, meeting Moody's eye. There was a bitter part of her that wanted him to remember the moment. To drive into his memory what she looked like—before.

He seemed to hesitate before his expression hardened. "You need to keep his interest as long as you can."

Hermione's mouth twisted but she nodded.

"I realised that," she said, running a fingertip along the edge of her book until she felt the crisp pages were about to cut into her. "I'm not sure if I can, but I'll do my best. Is there any chance I could speak to Severus before Friday? I have some questions for him."

"I'll set it up," Moody said. Then he turned and left. Friday.

Two days away.

So little time to prepare.

But so much time to dread.

She hadn't eaten since her first conversation with Moody. Couldn't bring herself to. Every time she tried to take a bite, her throat closed. She'd been living off tea.

Hermione closed her eyes and forced herself to breathe evenly.

She snapped the book she was holding closed and focused on her occlumency.

According to Severus she had a talent for it.

She slipped through her own memories and thoughts, sorting and organising them. She bolstered the walls around important Order meetings. The horcruxes. Then she shoved away all the memories that she tried not to think about.

There were so many memories of people dying inside her head.

She pushed them into the back of her mind and tried to squash them so she couldn't hear the dying screams that they were filled with. She filtered her hatred of Malfoy out and packed it carefully into a corner where it couldn't distract or overwhelm her.

Practicing occlumency was the closest thing to mental peace she could find.

It was part of what made her a talented healer. She could shutter her sympathy and empathy and simply focus on the process and procedure of healing.

It seemed like it was a common trait among healers.

Someday, when the war ended, perhaps Hermione could do a study on the number of natural occlumens in the field of healing.

She suspected that most casualty healers had at least a bit of a subconscious proclivity toward it. Occlumency was so rarely taught, most people probably didn't realise when they used it. Hermione hadn't.

For a long time, she had just thought she was cold. As the years of the war rolled by, her growing tendency to turn off her emotions and simply be rational was stark in its contrast to Ron and Harry's emotional drive.

She wasn't unfeeling—she felt things. But the emotions were supplemental. They didn't decide things for her.

It was always head first, heart followed.

It had started after Colin died. She couldn't be like Harry. That death became a defining moment for each of them.

After watching Hermione try to save Colin, Harry had become utterly convinced of the pure evil of dark magic. He became driven by what he felt was right; how he believed things were supposed to be.

For Hermione, the opposite had occurred. She realised the impossible advantage that the Death Eaters had over the Order. It was her awakening to the price of failure. She became convinced that almost any means could be justified to stop Voldemort. The cost of choosing to ascribe to idyllic morals and lose was too steep. It was simply the logical conclusion. The longer the war lasted, the more good and innocent people would suffer and die.

That difference in conclusion created a schism between herself and Harry.

Dark magic was responsible for robbing him of his parents, Sirius, Dumbledore, Colin...They'd all been stolen away by the dark arts. That Hermione's solution was to fight like with like was unthinkable to Harry.

Harry was determined: they weren't going to be killers. The Order wasn't going to be like that. Love had defeated the killing curse before. It would defeat Voldemort.

The cynical and pragmatic members in the Order were all but shouted down by everyone else. Even as the war grew worse, the conviction only became more firmly entrenched with each new life lost.

The believers in the Light couldn't abandon their position because it would force them to admit that all the deaths had been for nothing. That they'd asked people to die for an ideal that ultimately failed.

Rather than face such bitter truth, they became more and more convinced that the sacrifices and losses were somehow becoming so tremendous that they had to become worth it. That the balance of the scales between good and evil would soon tip to favour them, because—it simply must.

It made Hermione leave Order meetings ready to cry with frustration. She even resorted to writing up a presentation explaining sunk cost fallacy, irrational escalation of commitment, and self-justification theory. When she tried to explain muggle psychology it was brushed aside, and when she tried to push it she was treated like she was some kind of craven monster; trying to use psychology to legitimise murder.

She once spent thirteen hours in the infirmary painstakingly reconstructing Professor Flitwick's lungs. When she was called to an Order meeting immediately afterward she went in exhausted, and broached the topic of dark magic out of renewed fury. She'd been angrily informed by an equally angry and exhausted Ron that she was being a bitch and didn't even seem to understand the point of the Order.

Several other members nodded. Harry hadn't, but he refused to look at her, and he'd patted Ron on the shoulder as he left the meeting.

She cried afterwards.

Severus had found her in a storage closet, having an emotional breakdown. After alternating between mildly insulting her and grossly insulting the rest of the Order for several minutes, he'd managed to make her regain her composure.

Flattery by way of restraint.

The next time he attended an Order meeting he had given her a book on occlumency. He hadn't had the time to train her, but Hermione hadn't needed training. Just reading the concepts enabled her to internalise the technique.

Severus later told her he'd suspected as much. She was a natural occlumens. It was part of why she was talented in healing and potions. She had the ability to fully compartmentalise when she needed to.

After five years of war, Hermione felt as though her entire life had gradually become sequestered into various little boxes. Her eternally strained relationship with Ron and Harry was carefully buried in a corner where she couldn't feel it. Most of her relationships felt put away. In the center of herself, in the enormous space her friendship with Harry and Ron had long filled, there was now a cavern that she kept dutifully occupied with work. After a few minutes, she reopened her eyes and resumed reading. She only had two days left to prepare.

Minerva McGonagall unexpectedly arrived at Grimmauld Place the next afternoon, as Hermione's hospital shift ended. The former headmistress of Hogwarts rarely left Scotland. After Hogwarts had been shuttered, McGonagall had undertaken guardianship of all the underage witches and wizards who were orphaned or whose parents were fighting in the war. She'd returned to her father's manse in Caithness and after abusing expansion charms to an absurd degree, making it large enough to house over a hundred children.

She regarded anyone without parents as being her charge. With Hermione's parents obliviated and hidden in Australia, that meant Minerva regarded Hermione as being under that umbrella as well.

They went to tea in muggle London.

When they had seated themselves, she stared silently at Hermione for a long time.

"I had hoped you would refuse," Minerva said at length.

"Did you really think I would?" Hermione asked, her voice steady as she finished pouring the tea.

"No," Minerva said stiffly. "My hopes and beliefs have been separate things for some time now. Which is why I said it was unconscionable."

"The Order needs this."

There was a silence as each woman studied the other. The tension between them vibrated; like the sob of a violin bow drawn carelessly across the strings. Sharp. Aching. Deeply felt.

After a minute, Minerva spoke again.

"You...were one of the most remarkable students I had the privilege to teach. Your relentlessness back in Hogwarts was always something that I admired—"

Minerva paused.

"But—?" Hermione pressed, preparing herself for the sharp critique that waited on the far side of the compliment.

"But—" Minerva put her teacup back in its saucer with a sharp click, "the way you have carried that tendency into the war has troubled me. I sometimes wonder where the line is for you. If you even have one." Once—such a rebuke would have made a Hermione blush and reconsider herself. Now she didn't even blink. "Desperate times call for desperate measures," she said. "For extreme diseases, extreme methods of cure, as to restriction, are most suitable."

Minerva's expression hardened, her lips thinning.

"And what of 'first do no harm'? Or do you think the oath does not apply when the harm is to yourself?"

"Hippocrates never said it." Hermione sipped her tea with more casualness than she felt. "Primum non nocere. It was coined in the seventeenth century. The Latin gives it away. Besides—I'm not doing this as a healer."

"That Moody is asking this of you at all makes him as depraved as the mind that conceived of it." Minerva's Scottish burr became overt from the emotion her voice carried. "I would have thought there would be limits. When does the price of winning become too steep? This is a war already waged with the blood of children. Are we selling them now too?"

Hermione sighed. "I'm not a child anymore, Minerva. This is a choice I'm making. No one is forcing it on me."

"Anyone who knows you knew you'd agree to it. Draco Malfoy knew without any doubt what you'd say when the question was put to you. Do you really think that for someone of your nature it was ever a question of choice?"

"No more than becoming a healer or anything else I've ever done then." Hermione suddenly felt drained. "Making hard choices—someone has to do. Someone has to suffer. I'm willing to. I can bear it. Why try to force it onto someone who can't?"

"You're so like Alastor," Minerva said in a bitter tone. There appeared to be tears in the corners of her eyes. "When he told me, I told him no. I said, never. There are lines that cannot be crossed because once we ask those things we're no better. And then he told me he wasn't telling me in order to consult. The decision had already been made by himself and Kingsley. He was simply telling me so that someone with concern for you would be aware—in case of what Draco Malfoy does to you—"

Minerva's voice cracked abruptly.

Hermione felt overwhelmed by a surge of affection, but she forced herself not to react. Not to waver.

"He killed Albus," Minerva said after a moment, the words trembling with emotion.

"I know. I haven't forgotten."

"He was barely sixteen then. He killed one of the greatest wizards of our time in cold blood in a hallway full of first-years. Even Tom Riddle was closer to seventeen when he started killing, and he started with a schoolgirl, in secret in a bathroom. What kind of person do you imagine Draco Malfoy is now? Six years later." "He's our best chance of turning this war around. We need this, Minerva. You see the orphans, but I see the bodies. We can't afford to waste any opportunities now. I'm not going to turn down something that can give the Order even a fraction of a better chance of winning. No single person matters more than the whole war." "You would do anything to end this war."

"I would."

"James Potter used to say that war is hell. I used to agree with him. But now—I think he was wrong.

War is far worse than hell. You're no sinner; this is not a fate you deserve. And yet, it seems as though you're determined to try damning yourself if it means winning."

"War is War. Hell is Hell. And of the two, war is a lot worse," Hermione quoted and then smiled sadly. "My father used to say that. It came from a muggle television show."

Hermione hesitated for a moment before adding "You're right. I am willing to do anything to win this war. I don't know that I'm doing the right thing, I'm sure that most people will say I'm not. I know there will be no coming back from this—not to Harry or Ron, even if it buys us a victory in the end. But—saving them is worth it to me. I have always been prepared to pay the price for the lengths I'm willing to go. I have never been blind to the consequences."

Minerva didn't reply. She sipped her tea, and stared at Hermione as though she never expected to see her again.

Hermione met her gaze and wondered to herself whether it might be true.

Chapter End Notes

I know, no Draco yet. He is coming.

Quotations are from Hippocrates and M.A.S.H.

*Flashback 3*

Moody sent word that Severus would be at Spinner's End late in the afternoon on Friday. Hermione got ready and hoped it would be an easier conversation than the one she'd had with Minerva. She and Severus had struck up a friendship of sorts during the war. It had been started by Hermione when she appeared at his door following Dumbledore's death, asking him to train her in potion making. Over the years, as Hermione's relationships with other Order members had grown fraught, they came to enjoy the mutual bitterness of each other's company. Not that they were close. Neither of them had time to be friends with anyone. They simply signaled their respect for each other with small gestures. Severus by not viciously insulting Hermione during Order meetings the way he insulted everyone else, and Hermione by shutting down the ongoing suspicions of Harry and others about whether Severus was truly on the Order's side since they weren't winning. When Hermione arrived at Severus' home, she found the door left ajar for her, and Severus brewing in the kitchen. The steamy room was a sensory assault. Potion making had given Hermione the habit of compulsively identifying scents. The air was thick with the combined aromas of stewed herbs and tinctures. Sharp and sweet yarrow, the mustiness of dried dandelion flowers, the mineral bitterness of ground roots, and burn and grittiness of ashwinder eggshells she could almost taste in the air. The tang of Magic was effused through the scents, clinging to her skin and hair.

"Something new?" she inquired after watching him huddle over the cauldron for several minutes. "Clearly," he replied in a snide tone as he added a drop of Acromantula venom. The potion burped a cloud of sour yellow vapour, and Severus stepped back to avoid it with a faint hiss of irritation. Hermione glanced at the ingredients laid out. "Is there a new curse?" "Indeed. Dolohov has outdone himself this time. Effortless to cast and highly effective. Countering it is simple but the damage is immediate. They'll start using it in the field soon." "What type?" "Contagious acid boils." Hermione pressed her lips together, and drew a sharp breath. She'd have a lot of research to do in preparation. Acid spells had rarely appeared during battles in the past, but the effects of them were often devastating and difficult to heal.

Severus added four drops of moondew, and then turned to stare at her. "You have twenty minutes," he said, sweeping ahead of her into the sitting room. She dawdled a moment longer to study the slowly simmering potion before turning to follow him.

"I hear you're sacrificing yourself for the cause," he drawled from an armchair before she'd seated herself. "Moody said you thought it was a legitimate offer," she said evenly. "True," he said. He didn't offer tea. "Why?" she asked. There was no point in being coy. She wanted straight answers. After so many years of war, she had found Severus answered short direct questions better than any other. "Draco Malfoy does not serve anyone," he answered. Hermione waited. "Of course, technically he serves the Dark Lord," he said, making a dismissive gesture with his hand, "But that is out of necessity, not loyalty. His motivation is personal in nature. Whatever that motive is, he has decided that the Order can enable him to achieve it better than the Dark Lord can." Severus paused and then added "He will not be loyal to the Order but he'll be as excellent a spy as he is a Death Eater." "Is it worth it if we can't trust him?" Hermione asked. "At this point I don't think the Order

has any other option. Do you?"

Hermione shook her head and gripped the arms of the chair. "And—I think he miscalculated somewhat when he made his offer," Severus added. "How?" "Asking for you. I think it was a mistake on his part," Severus said staring at her speculatively. Hermione blinked. "Why?"

"As I mentioned to Moody, I observed Draco had a sort of fascination with you in school. Do not misunderstand; I am not claiming it to have been anything meaningful, much less serious. However, you were someone he noticed. You may be able to use that fact to your advantage. I don't believe he realises it."

"He demanded to own me. I think he realises it," Hermione pointed out. "If he merely wanted a body to own or fuck, he could get practically any one he wanted with little effort. You're hardly Helen of Troy, and even it you were, he hasn't laid eyes on you in almost six years. And you certainly weren't then. I doubt he even knows what you currently look like. On the list of grudges he likely carries now, I doubt your academic rivalry still qualifies," Snape retorted. "You are not the motive for his switch of allegiance."

Severus' words plunged Hermione into a state of simultaneous relief and despair. She did not want the attention of Draco Malfoy—but she needed it. She felt suddenly tempted to cry over the sheer impossibility of the mission she had.

"Therefore," continued Snape, "his decision to add you into his demands is an opening. If you choose to take it. You—could make him loyal." "By what? Seducing him?" Hermione asked skeptically. "By holding his interest," Snape said, rolling his eyes as though she were dense. "You are an intelligent enough witch. Be interesting to him. Find your way into his mind so that he starts to want what he cannot simply demand from you. You're most assuredly not going to hold him with your feminine wiles." Snape snorted as he said it.

"Men like Draco Malfoy are ambitious, which makes them quickly bored by anything that is easy for them to obtain. Sex is possibly one of the easiest things for him to get; even sex with you now—given the terms he set. You will have to be more than that, and you will have to make him see it." Hermione gave a curt nod with assurance she did not feel as Snape added, "He'll have a considerable advantage of power over you. However, the fact that you hold his attention means you may still have a hand worth playing. After nearly six years, when he had a chance to demand anything, you were what occurred to him to ask for. You will have to utilise that knowledge carefully if you wish to equalise things or make him loyal." "Malfoy isn't stupid. He'll expect it." "He will." "But you think I can manage it?" "Are you trying to fish for compliments, Miss Granger?" Severus said coolly. "At this point in the war, I think almost anything is worth attempting. That you have any chance of succeeding is highly unlikely. You have agreed to sell yourself in exchange for information to an incredibly dangerous wizard who has obtained most of his power by means of his own considerable intelligence. A wizard whose current motives are a mystery; even to those who have known him a lifetime. He is exceptionally isolated and mercurial, even by Death Eater standards. He did not get where he is by being easily beaten or having predictable weaknesses." There was a long pause. It appeared Snape had no further insight to offer.

Hermione stood, feeling freshly demoralised.

She was selling herself in a gamble with a multiple points of failure. It would likely be futile.

She was going to do it anyway. She hesitated, a question rising to her lips that she was almost afraid to ask. “Is he—,” she stammered. “How—cruel do you know of him being?” Snape stared at her with his inscrutable black eyes. “I haven’t known him well since your fifth year. However, bully though he was, I had never considered him to be a sadist.” Hermione nodded jerkily, feeling light-headed as she turned to go. “I wish you luck, Miss Granger. You are a better friend than Harry Potter will ever deserve.”

Severus’ voice had a trace of regret in it. Hermione paused and brought her hand up to her throat, tracing her thumb along her collarbone for a moment before twisting the chain of her necklace between her fingers.

“I’m not *just* doing this for Harry,” she said. Severus snorted and she looked at him defensively. “There is a whole world out there that doesn’t even know they’re relying on us. Besides, if we lose, what possible chance do you think I’ll have?”

He gave a short nod of agreement. She left Spinner’s End without another word. When Hermione returned to Grimmauld Place, she went into the bathroom and stared at her reflection. She was thin and tired-looking. Her skin was pale from lack of sunlight. Her features were sharper than they had been in school; a bit daintier. Her protruding cheekbones made her look more elegant. Her eyes—well, she had always thought they were her best feature—large and dark, but with enough fire in them that they didn’t make her look too naive. Her hair remained her cross to bear. Still bushy, but it was long enough nowadays that the weight held it down somewhat. She kept it braided and pinned back to keep it out of her face when brewing and healing. She pulled her clothes off and stepped into the shower. The hot water beating down on her skin felt like safety. She didn’t want to leave it, but after scrubbing herself from head to toe she made herself shut off the water and step out. She cast a quick shaving charm on her legs and under her arms, and toweled off. Wiping off the steam from the mirror, she appraised the body in the reflection critically. She’d have to hope Malfoy’s subconscious interest was primarily in her mind because she was certainly not Helen of Troy. Stress had eaten away her curves. She was bony and thin-limbed. Not particularly flawed anywhere, but generally lacking in softness in the places men typically liked to hold. Insofar as general sex appeal went, she was assuredly middling. It was simply not a quality she had ever had the thought or time to cultivate in herself. Dwelling on how she came across sexually—it just hadn’t really seemed to be of pressing importance. It had not occurred to her that the war was going to require her to offer herself—as a mistress? Whore? War prize?—to a Death Eater. She did not bother to fuss over her underwear or clothing as she dressed. There was no point in trying to pretend to have wiles or attributes she did not. She would undoubtedly do it poorly. Trying to undertake an additional angle might cause her to exceed her limitations and reveal her hand.

As she prepared to leave she glanced in the mirror and fingered the chain around her neck, hesitating before she pulled it out from under her shirt and stared at the amulet that hung from it. The pendant of Aset. A tiny throne rested upon deep scarlet stone, a sun-disk, fitted between two horns. It had been given to Hermione when she’d briefly studied healing in Egypt, before returning to Europe to study in Austria.

She pulled it off and slipped it into a beaded bag under her bed.

If she died, Severus would probably know what it was.

The location Malfoy had provided was in the village of Whitecroft. Moody apparated her there, and

then after glancing sharply around for a minute with his magical eye, vanished again with another pop.

Feeling so viscerally abandoned that her skin hurt, Hermione walked up the gravel lane of the address, glancing around at an empty lot. Unplottable. Or else a midpoint before she was directed to the real location. After glancing around nervously, she swallowed hard and resigned herself to wait. There was a stump to the side of the lane. She seated herself. After another minute, she pulled out a book, keeping her ears alert for any noise. She had read six pages when a sound to her left made her look up sharply. The light from a floating doorway in the empty lot suddenly appeared, and with it a rundown shack began bleeding into view. Draco Malfoy stood framed in the door. She hadn't seen him in over five years. She slipped the book into her bag and walked forward; her heart rate increased with every step.

He had grown taller and broader. The haughtiness of his school days had faded, replaced with a cold sense of power. Deadly assurance. Even after she had ascended the steps, he towered over her. He was at least as tall as Ron, but he felt larger. Ron's height was always offset by his lankiness and awkwardness. Malfoy owned every inch of his stature, as though it were an additional testament to his superiority as he stared down his nose at her. His face had lost all trace of boyishness. It was cruelly beautiful. His sharp aristocratic features were set in a hard unyielding expression. His grey eyes were like knives. His hair still that pale, white blond combed carelessly aside. He leaned nonchalantly against the doorframe. He left just enough space for her to enter, so long as she brushed lightly against his robes. She caught the sharp scent of cedar in the fabric as she passed. He felt dangerous. She could feel the taint of dark magic around him.

Approaching him was like walking toward a wolf or a dragon. Her whole body felt on edge as she drew nearer. She struggled against a fear that felt like it were slicing its way down her spine.

A sense of ruthlessness hung about him.

He had killed Dumbledore at the age of sixteen, and that had been only the start of his bloodstained ascent. If an assassin's blade were made into a man, it would take the form of Draco Malfoy. She stared up at him. Taking him in. Beautiful and damned. A fallen angel. Or perhaps the angel of death. Such cliches, and yet they somehow captured him. If he was complicated or conflicted, he didn't show it; he just seemed cruel, harsh, and beautiful. "Malfoy. I understand you want to help the Order," she said after she walked into the shack and he shut the door behind her. She fought against the impulse to flinch or turn sharply when she heard it click.

She was alone in a house with Draco Malfoy, whom she had agreed to sell herself to in exchange for information.

The Calming Draught she had taken immediately before leaving with Moody was far from sufficient relief to the nauseating terror crawling through her. She felt it everywhere; in her spine, and her stomach, and her hands, and closing around her throat as surely as if he were strangling her.

She squared her shoulders and forced herself to survey the room slowly.

The building seemed primarily composed of one large, empty room. Hardly any furniture to be seen. Two chairs. A table. Nothing else.

No bed. "You understand the terms?" he said coolly when she looked at him again.

“A pardon. And me. In exchange for the information.” “Both now and after the war.” His eyes gleamed with a mixture of cruelty and satisfaction as he said it.

Hermione didn’t flinch.

“Yes. I’m yours from now on. Moody says he’ll act as Bonder if you require an Unbreakable Vow,” she said, trying to keep any bitterness from her tone. He gave a thin smirk. “That won’t be necessary. I’ll trust that Gryffindor nobility you have if you swear it now.” “I swear it. I’m yours. You have my word,” she said without giving herself time to hesitate. She wished she could feel triumphant that he was leaving her a way out. But—if they won the war at this point it would be because of him. She’d owe him. They all would. “Until we win you aren’t to do anything that will interfere with my ability to contribute to the Order,” she reminded him firmly. “Ah yes. I’ll have to make sure I keep you alive until this is over.” He smirked as he looked her over.

“I want you to swear it,” she said in a tense voice.

His eyes flashed and he laid a hand across his heart. “I swear it,” he said in a droll tone, “I won’t interfere with your contributions to the Order.”

Then he tsked. “My, but you’re suspicious of me, aren’t you? Worried this is all just a ploy on my part to get a piece of you before the war ends and you die,” he speculated. “Don’t fret. As a token of my sincerity, I won’t touch you—yet. After all, I’ve waited this long to get you as my prize, I can restrain myself a bit longer.” He smiled wolfishly at her. “In the meantime, I’ll let you go running back to your precious Order with my information, and sustain myself with your delightful company.” If Malfoy were trying to set Hermione on edge he was doing an excellent job of it.

As though the thought of consenting to whatever awful thing he wanted to do to her wasn’t bad enough, having to keep dreading it almost felt worse.

She gritted her teeth and forced herself to breathe. She slid a hand behind her back and fisted it tightly, then forced herself to open her fingers slowly. Bracing herself. Clearing her mind.

This was better, she reasoned. The longer he waited to act, the more time she had to try to ensure his loyalty; to find a way to bring him to heel before he tired of her.

She nodded shortly. “Alright. That’s—generous of you.” He laid a hand over his heart. “You have no idea what joy it brings me to hear you say that,” he said with false elation. Hermione’s eyes narrowed. She couldn’t understand him. His true motive was escaping her entirely. She hated how disadvantaged that made her. “But you know...” said Malfoy suddenly looking contemplative. “Perhaps, you should give me something—” Hermione stared. “—to warm my cold heart,” he said leering. “A memory to keep me motivated.” “What do you want?” she asked in a stiff voice. She started mentally calculating likely options. Maybe he’d make her strip. Or suck him off—she’d never done it before, she’d surely be terrible. Or come on her face. Or maybe he wanted her to stand there and let him curse her. Or just get to backhand her across the face in retribution for third year. “You don’t sound very enthusiastic,” Malfoy said. "I'm offended, truly." Hermione tried to restrain herself from glaring at him. “Would you like me to kiss you or just stand here and let you hex me?” she inquired in the most demure tone she could manage. Malfoy gave a barking laugh. “My goodness, Granger. You are desperate.” “I’m here. I assumed that was obvious.” “So true,” he said nodding. “Well, I’m all dueled out for today. Let’s see if that mouth of yours is capable of doing anything but talking.” Hermione thought she might vomit, and the revulsion must have shown on

her face. Malfoy smiled cruelly.

“Kiss me,” he said in clarification. “As a demonstration of your sincerity.”

He smirked at her, and didn’t move. He just stood there, waiting for her to approach him. Hermione’s whole body felt drenched with cold terror at the thought of reaching out and touching him. Of having him touch her with those cold, pale, murderous hands of his.

Of pressing her mouth against his.

Standing near him without having her wand pointed at his heart felt as vulnerable as exposing her throat to wolf. She hesitated. “How do you want me to kiss you?” she inquired. “Surprise me,” he said, shrugging. Surprise him. Well, that was an opening; an opportunity she had to capitalise on. She analysed him quickly. He was goading her. The entire conversation seemed to be intentionally trying to make her angry with him. To see her writhe under the power he had over her. This kiss was probably intended to seal her animosity. He expected her to be resistant and proud, unable to squash her hatred; so he could trick her into fueling her own punishment and keep her distracted by her emotions. She couldn’t give it to him. She steeled herself. She would not lose. She drew closer to him, studying his face carefully. She had never been so close to him before. For someone so “eager” for her, he didn’t look it. His irises were contracted. His eyes mostly grey. He seemed—amused.

The coil of fear in her spine felt like a needle being driven down her back. Her heart was beating so forcefully it felt as though it were bruising itself against her ribs.

She slid her arms up around his neck and pulled him down toward herself. He smirked and permitted it. When their lips were almost touching she paused, half expecting to find a knife buried to the hilt in her stomach. There was a brief moment of stillness between them—breathing slowly. Close enough for the air to ghost across each other’s faces. His breath smelled like juniper, peppery and sharp like a fresh-cut evergreen. She studied that deadliness and coldness of his eyes. She wondered what he saw as he looked back. Murderers are still men, she told herself. Then she gave him a slow, sweet kiss. She imagined how she’d do it for someone she felt affectionate toward. Sliding her hands up into his hair as she deepened it. She teased his lips with her tongue, and murmured slightly against his mouth. He tasted like gin.

It was clearly not what he had expected. Apparently surprises weren’t really his thing. He stilled in visible astonishment the moment their lips softly met, and after a moment jerked away from her. His eyes were darker now.

Hermione wasn’t sure if she were pleased or concerned by that detail.

Her heart rate slowed somewhat.

His amusement had vanished, and he suddenly seemed to be considering her more seriously. “You don’t fight much, do you?” he abruptly asked. “No. Most of my work is outside of raids,” she admitted, not willing to detail what she did. She was there to get information, not give it. “Do you know occlumency?” “Yes. Moody trained me,” she lied. “I haven’t had much practice, but he said I was fairly solid at it.” “Well, that’s a relief. It would be a problem if you were ever picked up and they found the details of this arrangement in your mind,” he said with the most serious expression she’d yet seen on his face. Then he sneered. “I hope you don’t mind if I check for myself just how good you are.” That was all the warning he gave before driving abruptly into her mind. Hermione’s

shields were already up, and the force with which he drove into them was enough to make her head resound like he'd struck a gong inside it. He kept shoving forcefully against her walls, again and again, until she was gasping with pain as she kept him out. Then he paused, and she nearly stumbled. "You're surprisingly good at it," he said, looking as though he actually were surprised. The compliment caught her off guard. Abruptly, he smashed into her mind again. The brief respite had been a feint. She was insufficiently braced for a renewed attack. He found a weak spot, and sliced through it with the speed of an arrow. She tried to shove him back out, but he quickly moved so far into her memories she couldn't. She could barely even slow him. Then abruptly, without even pausing to look at anything in her mind, he wrenched himself back out. She nearly fell over backwards but caught herself, gripping her forehead as she gasped from the pain. "It's a common trick," he said casually, not looking as though his assault on her mind had required any effort on his part. "After an intense attack, when an occlumens thinks it's done, they relax slightly. It's the perfect opportunity to get in." Hermione was still catching her breath and couldn't respond, so he continued, "If ever you're under interrogation by a truly accomplished legilimens, you'll never keep them out with the sheer strength of your mental walls. If you were a minor member in the Resistance, they'd probably just kill you rather than go to the effort of getting in. But you're an Order member. Potter's Golden Girl. If they ever get their hands on you, they'll probably bring you to me, or Severus, or even the Dark Lord himself. I'm afraid you're going to need to brush up on your occlumency skills." "How?" Her voice sounded rasping. She hadn't known it was possible for a mental attack to be so powerful. No wonder Harry had hated his sessions with Snape. Her mind was in agony. "The trick is letting them in," Malfoy informed her.

"What?" "Put in a bit of effort, but eventually pretend to give way. Once they're in, give them false memories or distract them by feinting toward something of less importance. You'll never keep the Dark Lord out of your mind, but if he thinks you're weak, he'll assume victory. You'll have to give up something valuable enough to seem legitimate. However, it's a way to keep the things that matter most hidden." Hermione's brain churned as she considered it. Of course, there had to be more to it than just mental walls. There was no way Severus could have deceived the Dark Lord for so many years simply by refusing to allow him to access his mind. "Spend time thinking about it. If I'm looking for information on Potter or Weasley or the Order, what can you give up that will seem like the biggest secret you've got? Legilimency is like setting someone's house on fire. Minds instinctively bolt to protect what's most important to hide. You have to train yourself to do the reverse. Rush toward what doesn't matter. Practice pulling those memories around in your mind like you're hiding them. I'll try again next week." Hermione nodded. She hated the thought of him in her head again, but his reasoning was sound. It would be an invaluable skill. Malfoy reached into his pocket and tossed something toward her. She caught it reflexively. She stared into her palm. It was—well, it looked like a wedding band, if wedding bands came in black. She looked up at Malfoy in astonishment. "Your protean charm from fifth year inspired me." He smirked, and raised his right hand indicating a matching onyx band on it. "It'll burn briefly if I need to meet. Twice if it's urgent. I'd highly advise coming quickly if it burns twice. If you want to reach out, the wards here will let me know when you arrive. But otherwise we should stick to a schedule. Is there a time you can get away without drawing suspicion?" Hermione slid the ring onto the pointer finger of her left hand. It was a simple, slightly geometric band. Not flashy or likely to draw attention. She suspected there was a heavy notice-me-not charm on it. "I go out for potion ingredients early on Tuesday mornings. I could add an extra half hour without anyone paying attention. Would seven-thirty work?" He nodded. "If I can't come for some reason, come back again at the same time in the evening," he told

her. “What if I can’t come?” Hermione asked. His eyes narrowed. He was trying to determine what it was she did for the Order. Well, she wasn’t interested in volunteering the information. “I’ll wait five minutes and assume you can’t make it.” “Fine,” she agreed flatly. He smirked, and with a flick of his wand conjured a scroll of parchment which he held out to her. “My first installment,” he drawled, leering at her again. She took it from him and unrolled it partially, glancing at several maps and building blueprints. “I’m trusting that Moody has the sense not to use everything at once,” he said. “Your service will be one of the Order’s most carefully protected secrets. You’re useless once your cover’s blown. We won’t risk it.” “Good,” he said with a cold voice. “I’ll see you Tuesday then. Practice your occlumency.” He vanished with a crack.

*Flashback 4*

**April 2002**

The next time she arrived at the shack, she had barely gotten through the door before Malfoy abruptly apparated in, nearly on top of her. He grabbed her firmly, and backed her up against a wall as his lips crashed into hers. Hermione barely had time to think or react. Her eyes widened in astonishment and as they did, his eyes met hers and he abruptly invaded her mind. She had been so startled, her occlumency walls had fallen. The terrifying distraction of his body pressed against hers while he kissed her made it difficult to focus solely on the sensation of his mind tearing its way through her consciousness. He skimmed through her recent memories; brewing an invisibility potion for the ring he'd given her, taking Lee Jordan and dropping him at St Mungo's. He found her memory of their previous meeting. She could feel him experiencing it, even while she was also keenly aware of his lips moving away from hers and kissing along her jaw, while his hands slid along her body. He started moving toward the memory of her conversation with Snape. No. She didn't want him to see that one. Even though she was confident he would know what she was trying to do, she didn't want him to have confirmation of it. She forced herself not to pull the memory away or hide it. Instead she grabbed onto the first thing she could think of and jerked it forcefully back further into her memories. Malfoy had to have known it was a feint, but he gamely chased after it. After keeping it away from him for a few seconds, she let him catch it. *Third year Malfoy stood in front of her, sneering. "Have you ever seen anything quite as pathetic?" said Malfoy. "And he's supposed to be our teacher!" Harry and Ron moved angrily toward him, but Hermione was the quickest—SMACK! She slapped Malfoy across the face with all the strength she could muster. Her hand felt aflame from the force, and his pale skin immediately bloomed scarlet where she struck him. He staggered, looking at her with a mixture of pain and astonishment. "Don't you dare call Hagrid pathetic, you foul—you evil—" she roared.* Malfoy abruptly jerked out of her mind and stepped away, shaking. Hermione stared at him, expecting him to be enraged that she'd tricked him with that memory. Then she realized after a moment that he was laughing. That felt more terrifying. "Well done," he said, still chuckling after a minute. "I expected it would take you longer before you'd be able to do it." Hermione was slumped against the wall, trying to recover herself from his combined mental and physical assault. A migraine was already steadily beginning to creep up on her. "Is this the way you usually teach occlumency?" she said after a moment. His lips quirked faintly. "Only with you," he said with a thin smile. "I can't have you doubting my sincerity, now can I? I needed to do something to catch you off guard. So—" he shrugged. "Two gnomes, one kneazle. I'm sure you didn't expect me to keep my hands entirely to myself." Hermione fought back the urge to sneer at him. "Should I wear stockings the next time I come?" she asked, her voice caustic. His eyes seemed to darken. "Hmm. No. I rather like you like this. Being dirty and bedraggled in muggle clothing suits you. And I intend to savour you. You needn't start wearing them—yet." Hermione felt a shiver go through her; of fear, but also from the tension between them, a strain of animosity and calculation filled the air. He stepped closer to her and caught hold of her left hand, lifting it as he slid his thumb across the ring that reappeared on her hand when he stared down at it.

“How does this work?”

“The potion is based on Magical principles similar to the Fidelius,” she said, slipping her hand free. “It’s only visible if you know to look for it. Otherwise it’s undetectable. Only you and I can see it.” Malfoy quirked an approving eyebrow.

“I don’t believe I’ve heard of that potion.” “It’s new,” she said stiffly.

“Yours?”

Hermione gave a reluctant nod. “It’s not actually that useful. It only works on metals.”

“Interesting,” he murmured, stepping closer.

Every time he drew near, she felt a renewed awareness of how dangerous he was. The dark magic came off of him in waves; it clung to his clothes and his hair and almost emanated from his skin. It was as though he wore a cloak of darkness and rage that he was simply keeping in check around her.

There was so much darkness. All the deaths he was responsible for.

He was drenched in them.

“Let’s try again. And see how long you can keep it up.” His lips pulled into brief smirk. “I won’t kiss you—this time.” He drove into her mind again. She kept him out with her walls for a minute while she organised her mind and memories. Then she pretended to have the shield give away. She wasn’t sure she was actually good at it, or if he was having the decency to restrict himself from rifling through all her memories. He allowed her strong attempts at distracting him to succeed. After she’d successfully done it a dozen times, he withdrew.

Hermione felt as though her head were about to crack open; as though the pain were a form of pressure that threatened to break through her skull. The pain was agonising. Her eyes were welling up with tears, and she bit down on her lip to try to keep from crying. “Drink this,” he ordered, slipping a vial of pain relief potion into her hand. “Otherwise you may black out when you try to apparate. I wouldn’t recommend it.” She swallowed it, fairly certain he wasn’t going to poison her. “Did that happen to you?” she asked when the pain began easing so she could speak again and her vision was no longer littered with flashing black spots. “More than once,” Malfoy said shortly. “My training was—rigorous.” She nodded. It still seemed hard to believe he was the same school bully she had known.

Coldness and harshness were built up around him like the walls of a castle. All that scarcely subdued rage.

The boy who got boxes of sweets and had a spot bought for him on a quidditch team, who cried and whined over a scratched arm, was gone. Everything soft and indolent and pampered about him was carved away by the war. He hadn’t bought his way through Voldemort’s ranks with galleons. He’d paid in blood.

Everything was so hard and exacting. His smirking and leering, and the vagaries of his courtesy all felt like an act. Like a mask he was wearing to disguise just *how* cold he was.

If she wanted to succeed, she needed to get past his mask and coldness and rage. He might be intending to use her just as a form of vindictive or amusing stress relief, but she was still determined

to become more.

She needed to draw out his confidence until she could understand his motivation—until she found a vulnerability she could slip through. No one was pure ice. Not even Malfoy.

There was something about him. In his eyes. Something that looked like fire hidden deep within. She needed to find a way to reach it and then fuel it into something she could utilise. He expected her to hate him and try to manipulate him with false kindness and sympathy. She had to be clever about it. More clever than him. “Was that after fifth year?” He looked at her somewhat sharply. “Yes,” he said it in a clipped tone. “Your aunt?” “Hmm,” he hummed in confirmation. They were both staring at each other intently. “Not the only thing you learned that summer,” she said. “Are you needing a confession for something, Granger? Should I tell you everything I’ve done?” He drew closer so that he towered above her, and sneered down in her face.

She forced herself not to shrink or cower back. She stared up into his eyes.

“Do you want to?” she asked. There was the faintest flash of surprise in his expression. He seemed caught off guard by the question. He was lonely. She’d suspected as much, but now she felt certain. Dead mother, insane father. He was high up in Voldemort’s ranks and they were notoriously filled with backstabbing. If he ever had any regrets, he’d never told anyone. “No,” he said, voice sharp as he stepped away from her. She didn’t push. If he thought she were pushing, he’d shut up like a clam. She didn’t need to know. She just needed him to realize he wanted to tell someone—

—that he wanted to tell *her* . It would make her emotionally valuable to him. It would be a hook. An opening.

It would make her interesting.

“Did you want to go again?” she asked after a moment. He stared at her, silver eyes flat. “When I was trained, she’d have someone crucio me while she was trying to break into my mind. That’s probably what will happen to you, if you’re ever caught.” He didn’t give her time to react to the information before he slammed his way in. When he stopped, he didn’t wait for her to regain her breath before dropping a new scroll of information next to her and vanishing.

That week Hermione went back to Waterstones. She bought books on the psychological effects of loneliness. Books on orphans. Research of the psychology of child soldiers.

She didn’t hesitate as she underlined sections on their vulnerabilities; the ways by which they were prone to being taken advantage of and manipulated.

In a notebook upon which she placed a rather nasty security curse she began to draw up a psychological sketch of Draco Malfoy. What she’d noticed about him. Questions and theories she had.

The center of him—his motivation—remained a mysterious blank. But she felt as though she were beginning to get a sense of his edges.

The following Tuesday, he did not start by forcing his attentions on her. He set himself to provoking her in other ways.

He did not restrain himself at all when he invaded her mind for another round of occlumency training. He scrabbled into the back of it, and then meandered through the memories he happened to

come across. Forcing her to relive some of the deaths she tried hardest not to dwell on. Then, quite by accident, he came across the memory immediately following her conversation with Snape. She flinched when he drew near it, and he immediately pounced.

He watched her examine her facial features critically before stepping into the shower. And when she stepped out and appraised her naked body in the mirror, he stopped and stared, following her mental fault finding. She could feel his condescending amusement as he took her in. She writhed with embarrassment, and he felt that too. He stayed in the memory for far longer than it lasted and then withdrew entirely from her mind.

“Well,” he said, looking as though he were about to start laughing. “That certainly is one way to distract a legilimens.”

She glared up at him. She was sorely tempted to kick him in the groin and then try to stomp his teeth out.

“Pleased with your purchase?” Her tone was corrosive.

He gave a short laugh under his breath. “You’re rather scrawny. If you’d sent me the memory beforehand, I might have asked for someone else,” he said as he stepped back to look her over in person.

“A pity for us both then,” she said, her mouth twisting as she folded her arms defensively.

“Perhaps... But then again, if I hadn’t gotten you I would never have had a chance to encounter a brain organized like a filing cabinet.” His voice was light and casual, but his quicksilver eyes abruptly hardened. He cocked his head slightly to the side. “Moody didn’t train you. You’re a natural occlumens.”

Hermione nodded resignedly. She had assumed he’d realise it eventually. When she’d invented the lie, she hadn’t expected him to spend so much time poking around in her head.

“Self-taught, then?”

“I had a book,” she said stiffly.

He gave a barking laugh. “Of course.”

He was staring at her with an expression she couldn’t place. As though he were reassessing her. The realisation seemed to be making him to re-evaluate something about her.

Hermione didn’t want him to re-evaluate. If he did, he might decide to change his strategy. She liked the current way in which she was not having sex with him.

“What?” she snapped at him impatiently, hoping to break his train of thought. It seemed to work, the narrowed expression of his eyes eased slightly.

“Nothing,” he waved her off. “I’ve just never encountered one before.”

He smirked.

She stared at him with her own eyes narrowed.

“You’re one too,” she said with rising horror. She was trying to slip past the defenses of someone

who could also shutter and isolate their emotions and desires. He gave a mocking bow. “What are the odds?” he mused with a faint shrug.

There was a long silence.

They were both re-evaluating.

“Are you still going to teach me occlumency then?” she asked at length.

“Yes…” he said slowly. “It would be an oversight to only do it halfway. You’ll be able to learn quicker than I had expected.”

“Right.” She nodded and braced herself.

He drew closer to her. Her heart stuttered.

The movement reminded her of an animal stalking prey. Slow, subtle, gradual and then suddenly—too close.

She stared at his face so she wouldn’t focus on the physicality of him, on how easily he could break her with his bare hands.

His fingers came up and touched her chin lightly, tilting her head further back so that her throat felt bared.

“You are so full of surprises,” he said, his gaze dragging across her face before locking on her eyes.

Hermione rolled her eyes briefly.

“Do you say that to every girl?” she said in a sarcastically sweet tone.

She didn’t bother with the outer walls as he dived into her consciousness. It was the process of having them breached that made her head ache the most. She already felt reasonably confident in her ability to feign that they were easily cracked.

He didn’t make the invasion painful. Which startled her. She had assumed that legilimency was inherently painful. Instead it felt like her mind was a pensive he was simply dropping into. Her consciousness and his merged.

He seemed to be taking in her natural mental state.

Without the pain of the legilimency attack, Hermione was able to be more nuanced and intentional in her strategy. She shuffled her memories about with false carelessness, drawing his attention and then slipping certain ones off into further corners of her mind.

It—was like learning to dance. Or perhaps learning martial arts. All the movement was done slowly. Without force.

He gave her time to learn the technique. Feel what it was like to do it properly. Going over the forms. Drilling it again and again until she could do it instinctively, without needing to think.

At length he withdrew and glanced down at his wrist. “We’ve gone overtime.”

“Oh,” she said quietly, still mentally preoccupied by the technique she’d been trying to get right.

He stared down at her until she straightened and looked up at him. “Do you have any information this week?”

“Not really. There are more vampires arriving from Romania this month. No specific details yet.”

“If—“ Hermione hesitated.

He quirked an eyebrow at her, staring down and waiting.

“If—we needed something. Would you be able to get it for us?” she asked.

“It would depend on what it is.”

“A book.”

He snorted.

“It’s called Secrets of the Darkest Art. I’ve tried everything I can to find it. But the Order’s resources are limited.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” He gave an irritated sigh.

“Be careful,” she found herself saying.

He looked surprised.

“You won’t want Voldemort to know you’re looking for it.”

“How important is this book?” he asked with narrowed eyes.

“I don’t know. It might be nothing. Or it might be very important. But—don’t blow your cover for it.”

He rolled his eyes.

“As if I would,” he muttered before eying her sharply. “You should go. I’m sure Potter will be pining for you.”

Hermione gathered up her satchel of potion ingredients and slipped out of the shack.

Malfoy was staring after her contemplatively as she closed the door and apparated away. When she got back to Grimmauld Place, she was pensive as she bottled and prepped ingredients.

Malfoy was not what she had expected.

He was far less cruel than she had anticipated. She kept expecting his malice to suddenly cut through his facade. But either he was less malicious than she’d thought, or he wanted something more complex and nuanced from her interactions with him. She already felt almost certain he didn’t have any particular inclination towards hurting her.

She couldn’t place what he wanted.

Severus had been right. Malfoy was already proving to be an excellent spy. All the information he’d given Moody had been high quality and useful. The Order had successfully raided a prison and gotten more than fifty people out.

However, his motive remained a mystery. She couldn't understand what he could possibly get from spying. With his placement in Voldemort's army, he'd surely reap vast rewards with the Order's demise.

If the Order won, even with a pardon he'd undoubtedly become a pariah in the wizarding world for the rest of his life. Spies and traitors earned little respect, no matter how vital their contributions were.

Besides—Lucius Malfoy was a devoted follower of Voldemort. He blamed Narcissa's death on Ron and Harry, and directed almost all his energy to exacting revenge on them. While Draco might not share that sentiment—setting himself at odds with his father felt dubious. He'd modeled himself so carefully after his sire back in school, and had been incensed by his father's imprisonment in Azkaban at the end of fifth year.

Hermione laid out a tray full of dittany and cast a heat charm with the tip of her wand. Massaging her temple slightly with her other hand as she watched the leaves steadily dry.

Malfoy was not interested in her; not physically. At least no more than a man tended to be interested in any random woman. She'd studied the physiology of sexual attraction and he showed almost none of the signs, even after spending several minutes staring baldly at her naked reflection.

She flushed. The experience ranked unequivocally as the most embarrassing moment of her life.

So what was it all about? Why the kissing and groping? If it was all to provoke and anger her, the question of why still stood.

Why did he want to provoke her? What was driving the various tactics he was employing?

Initially he had clearly expected her to be so filled with hatred for him that she couldn't restrain it. Then, when he'd aggressively snogged her to break through her occlumency shields, he'd seemed to think he could use it to get her too consumed by emotions to think clearly. The way he'd appraised her in the mirror had also been clearly intended to sting.

He wanted her to hate him.

But when he'd realized she was an occlumens, he'd apparently decided to switch tactics again. He'd finally realized why he couldn't easily provoke her, and adapted once more.

But adapted for what? What was the point?

She couldn't understand it.

Hermione placed all the dry dittany leaves inside a large pestle, and began grinding them into powder.

"Mione?" Charlie popped his head into her potion supply closet.

"Yes?"

"Snape dropped by earlier looking for you."

"Oh. Did he say why?"

"Had a new recipe for you, I think. Gave it to Poppy. To heal some new curse he helped invent."

Charlie's expression was twisted with anger. Many of the Order members blamed Severus for every curse developed in Voldemort's curse division. They thought that if Severus were really on the Order's side, he'd find a way to sabotage the entire thing.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"You know if he weren't there, we'd lose dozens more people before we'd figure out the countercurses. His information is vital for giving me time to prepare."

"Yeah, and how many of our people do you reckon he's killed getting that information? Those are our people they're experimenting on to make the spells. He's murdering people, but it's alright 'cause he's sending us intelligence on countercurses. Does it really work that way?"

Hermione stilled from her dittany grinding.

"He's a spy, Charlie. Those are the kinds of things they have to do to maintain their cover. If he blew it to save a group of prisoners or tried to sabotage the place, Voldemort would just create a new one and we'd lose the intelligence. The loss would never pay off in the long run."

"So you say," Charlie said, his lips thin and his eyes hard, he turned and walked away.

Hermione ground the dittany for a few more minutes before funneling it into a jar. Severus must have developed a potion for healing the acid curse. She hoped it was different from the one he'd been working on when she stopped by Spinner's End.

She had no acromantula venom. Ministry issued identification was required to buy from apothecaries. She would have try to find a source from the black market; it would probably cost several hundred gallons. The Order was low on funds.

The Goblins had taken a neutral position in the war, but while Gringotts remained open to the Order, getting into the bank for money without being arrested was a challenge. Not to mention that being a Muggle-born was an imprisonable offense.

Most members of the Resistance were unemployable, either by blood or association.

It was fortunate that Harry had a large vault, because they probably would have been starved out of existence otherwise.

If the potion required acromantula venom—well, hopefully Severus would be able to give her a few drops. If not, she doubted the Order would budget for her to buy any unless the curse was being used constantly.

She crossed her fingers and went to find Poppy.

The hospital ward was crowded again.

The rescue at the prison had been successful, but many of the prisoners had injuries from torture or were malnourished. There had been a firefight during the escape, and some brutal curses had been used.

Those with minor injuries had been sent to some of the other safe houses, but Grimmauld Place kept the most complex and difficult injuries for Hermione and Poppy to care for. Poppy was hovering over Rolanda Hooch's bed. A tiny pinprick incision in Hooch's trachea kept reappearing and slowly

growing despite all their efforts to heal it. Whomever was on duty in the hospital ward had to keep a two minute timer running in a constant cycle to monitor it.

“Any change?” Hermione asked, leaning down and examining the injury alongside Poppy.

“Oh, Hermione, you’re back,” Poppy said in a sad voice. “Severus came and looked at it. He said it isn’t one of Voldemort’s new ones. So—it’s likely a miscast curse.”

Hermione sighed with relief before a sharp wave of guilt struck her. If it was a miscast curse, they were unlikely to encounter it again. But it also meant that they’d likely be unable to heal Rolanda. Hermione had tried without success to deconstruct the injury with spell analysis, trying to unravel it. The structure was so mangled and inconsistent it was impossible to neutralise.

“How much longer do you think the healing spells will work?” Pomfrey quietly asked, staring sadly at her longtime colleague. Hermione mentally calculated the time that had passed since Madam Hooch had been brought in. It was an obscure piece of knowledge but eventually healing charms ceased working when used in too great a frequency. Even magic couldn’t force a body to keep repairing itself beyond a certain point.

“If we keep healing it every two minutes the spells will probably continue working for another twenty hours,” Hermione told her gently.

Poppy nodded and tucked the blankets gently around Rolanda’s body.

“Severus left a new recipe for you,” she told Hermione. “He said you should get a flagon ready.”

Poppy reached into her pocket and withdrew a small roll of parchment and a vial.

Hermione lifted the vial up into the light.

Two drops of Acromantula venom. Probably worth more than fifty galleons.

She couldn’t afford to make any mistakes. She slipped the vial into her pocket and unfurled the recipe to see what it would require to brew.

She had all the ingredients. Except fluxweed, which she had to harvest under a full moon. She calculated the next lunar cycle. She’d have to wait for a week before she’d have everything she needed to make a batch.

If the curse were as serious as Severus had indicated, she would have to hope that there would be no skirmishes before the full moon. Which was likely a delusional notion.

At the end of the recipe, Severus had included the counter spell for the acid curse in his spiky handwriting. She reviewed it. It was simple, as he had said.

Hermione copied the countercurse onto a fresh sheet of parchment. An injury involving acid would need to be countered immediately. Waiting a few extra seconds to call a healer or apparate the wounded could add days to the recovery. The countercurse was simple enough; every Resistance member could learn it.

She wrote a brief note of explanation, and with a flick of her wand folded the note into a paper aeroplane and sent it zooming through the house to find Harry. “Would you be able to take your shift early?” Poppy said.

Hermione looked up and realised Poppy was looking grey with grief.

“Of course,” Hermione said quickly.

“I want to write Filius, Pomona, and Minerva. They might want to come say their goodbyes,” Poppy said, shoulders drooping. “The notes on what I’ve done are all in the logbook, and I just resealed the incision. So you can start a two minute count now.” Hermione watched Poppy Pomfrey as she walked with slow, heavy steps out of the hospital ward.

Hermione went over and glanced over the logbook. There were no surprises in it. She walked quietly from bed to bed. Everyone was still asleep, and a few were dosed with Draught of Living Death. It was a method of keeping them alive while certain, slow brewing potions were being made to cure them. She ran a precautionary diagnostic on each body, and ran through a mental checklist of which potions she needed to attend to. She needed to send out the first doses of wolfsbane potion to all the Lycanthropes in the Order.

It was a quiet day in the hospital ward. Aside from the constant recasting of the healing charm on Madam Hooch, most of the other injuries simply required careful supervision and time.

Hermione sat and speculated about what Malfoy might be like during their next meeting.

The fact he was also a natural occlumens was—problematic, to put it in the mildest of terms.

It meant his control ran deep. Trying to find her way in and make him loyal would be nearly impossible if he was able to winnow away and contain any effect she had on him.

If she wanted to have any chance of succeeding, she would have to be slow and insidious. To dig herself so deep into his psyche that he couldn’t drag or filter her out. Find a way into his heart. The one place that no amount of occlumency could block or sequester.

She shivered slightly.

She had never felt cruel before. Cold. Unfeeling. She’d been called those things, and believed they might be true. But cruel was a line she had always considered herself above. But what she was contemplating was possibly one of the cruelest things she could conceive of.

She squashed the hesitation.

He was the one who had demanded her.

Now and after the war.

She was well within her rights to ensure he paid full price for his demands. If he didn’t want her, he shouldn’t have asked.

She steeled herself, and summoned a book from her bag.

*Flashback 5*

**April 2002**

The following Tuesday, Malfoy behaved much in the way he had the week before.

He taught her occlumency, letting her practice the forms and techniques. He didn't make it hurt. He barely spoke a word to her. He only touched her once, to tilt her head further back in order to make eye contact. And then—while he was in her mind—she could feel his hand still resting on her neck, his thumb against her throat.

He didn't need to touch her. She knew. He could easily perform legilimency on her from several feet away.

He didn't pry. Didn't poke his head into memories that she overtly did not want him in. He just let her use his presence as a sort of practice dummy for learning evasive mental manoeuvring.

When he withdrew, she stared up at him curiously.

"Where did you learn that? I'm assuming your aunt didn't use the technique."

"She did not." His teeth bared slightly as he said it. "I read about it in a book. Malfoy Manor has a large library. It wouldn't work with most people, only other natural occlumens. Even though anyone can potentially learn occlumency or legilimency to some degree, it's always either painful or so subtle they can barely even feel it happening."

He looked at her and added with a smirk "You could say I'm experimenting on you."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Did the book require physical contact too?" she said in a sweet voice, eyeing his hand pointedly.

She immediately regretted saying it.

His hand tensed slightly, just enough to shift from resting to holding. His eyes darkened as his irises expanded incrementally.

"No.That—is just because I can."

He smirked as he pulled her forwards and dipped his head to kiss her. It was a cold kiss. His lips pressed against hers weren't wanting or passionate.

It was simply a reminder.

That he could.

That he was being restrained. That, if he wanted to, he could demand anything he desired from her and she had already consented to give it to him.

Hermione didn’t respond to the kiss. She just let his cold lips meet hers without resisting until he pulled away again.

“Do you have any information this week?” she asked as his hand slid off of her and he stepped back. He drew a scroll from his robes and handed it to her.

“Spell analysis and countercurse information for new curses from the Dark Lord’s curse development division,” he said. “There’s a new set being taught currently.”

Hermione slid the scroll open and glanced over the information listed. Severus had already given the Order all the details about the curses, but Malfoy couldn’t know that. That it had occurred to him was a sign of how useful and proactive he was able to be. If they lost Severus, Malfoy was able to provide both types of intelligence.

An excellent spy.

“This is invaluable information,” she said, packing it carefully into her satchel.

He shrugged.

“No, really. This will save lives. I didn’t even think to ask for this. That you did—I don’t know how to thank you enough.”

Malfoy looked vaguely uncomfortable with the gratitude.

“Whatever. It was an obvious piece of information to provide. The death rate in your Resistance is getting noticeable.”

Hermione felt the blood drain from her face, and he stared at her. “How much longer do you think you all can keep fighting?”

Her throat tightened. “As long as it takes or until there’s no one left. There’s no plan B, Malfoy. There’s no surrendering for us.”

He nodded. “Good to know.”

Then he paused as though abruptly recalling something. “Is there a safe house involving a lot of children up in Caithness?” Hermione blanched. “Why—why do you ask?”

His face grew hard. “It’s been noticed. Someone will likely be sent to investigate by the end of the week. Don’t let them find anything.”

Hermione nodded sharply. “I have to go,” she said, rushing to the door.

She summoned a corporeal patronus through sheer willpower. They’d become a struggle for her ever since she’d obliviated her parents. It had taken her several years to regain the ability, and they’d never fully regained the silver luminescence they‘d had during her fifth year.

“Find Minerva McGonagall,” she said. “Tell her to prep for evacuation.”

As her otter scampered away, she cast another. The sleek, translucent creature stood on its hind legs and stared up at her.

“Go find Kingsley Shacklebolt. Tell him we need a new safe house for Caithness.”

Then she apparated away to find Moody.

The process of evacuating children was slow and arduous. All of them were unable to apparate themselves, which meant that all available and easily contacted Resistance members had to be mobilised to carry them to safety via broomstick, repeated side-along apparition, or on the backs of thestrals. Creating portkeys was too time-consuming. None of the safe houses could risk having a floo connection.

The remote location had been a strategic choice. The hope was that it would pass unnoticed by Voldemort despite the presence of a great many odd children in such a small town. In retrospect, it was sheer luck they had succeeded for so long. There were few good options for trying to rehouse so many children in such a range of ages.

They had no backup safehouse for so many. The children had to be split up throughout dozens of safe houses. Ferrying them in small groups to other parts of the UK and then re-settling them, expanding rooms and transfiguring new beds.

Hermione made three trips. After she returned from the last one, she slumped against a wall with exhaustion. She'd apparated several toddlers all the way to Northern Ireland. They had vomited, and screamed, and sobbed with each progressive apparition. She'd been forced to stop and console them until they would hold still enough for her to safely apparate again without splinching anyone.

Minerva appeared and stopped in front of Hermione, her expression conflicted.

"Your information?" Minerva asked quietly.

Hermione nodded, "Moody's going to tell anyone who asks that he learned about it while interrogating a snatcher."

Minerva gave a sharp nod of acknowledgement and pressed her lips together, staring at Hermione for several seconds. "You are a good girl; I hope that's never doubted by anyone. Are you—alright?"

"He hasn't done anything to me." It was all the reassurance Hermione could give.

Something untwisted itself in Minerva's expression. She nodded sharply and then swept away to help take down the wards and shrink the furniture.

Hermione glanced at the time. It was a full moon that night and she needed fluxweed.

She stood up and walked out of the manse until she reached the edge of the anti-apparition barriers. Then she began the series of jumps back towards London.

She stopped in a large field she often started foraging at near the Forest of Dean. Holding her wand out, she cast a point me charm and followed it in search of the weedy plant.

The bright light of the moon cast the sea of grass in sharp shadows. The clustered trees nearby rose up like a black curtain against the bright night sky. As Hermione slid down a small slope, a gust of wind shifted across the field, rippling the grass so that it whispered softly. As the sliding, shifting sound faded, a low howl emerged from the trees downwind of Hermione.

She froze.

A werewolf.

There had never been werewolves in the area before. She had been so tired and distracted she hadn't even thought to take any precautions. Then another howl emerged. Further away. To her right.

And another howl.

There was a pack of werewolves in the Forest of Dean.

She almost apparated away but paused, hesitating. She needed fluxweed. If she didn't get it that night, she wouldn't be able to get any until the next month. She had to make the potion. Severus would not offer advice or take the time to invent potions unless it were urgent.

She bolted down the hill in the direction the locator spell was indicating.

Another howl. Closer.

She whipped the silver knife from her pocket and began slicing sections of fluxweed as fast as she could without affecting the potency. There wasn't enough.

She recast the locator spell and ran in the direction her wand sent her. As she did so, she looked up to see the sharp elongated shadow of a werewolf sauntering down the slope towards her. She skidded and nearly fell as she reached a spot with several fluxweed and cut them down in seconds.

The werewolf was less than twelve feet away and crouching into a lunge when she finally spun on her heel and apparated to the closest place she could think off.

Hermione reappeared on the steps of Malfoy's unplottable shack. Gasping for air, she dropped down onto the top step and sat panting as she tried to recover her breath.

She leaned against the door and closed her eyes as her heart continued pounding violently.

She was terribly out of shape. She couldn't believe how quickly she'd tired out from running. Her oesophagus burned, and there was a sharp, stabbing pain through her lungs every time she breathed in.

Aside from tromping through the countryside in search of potion ingredients, Hermione didn't engage in any physically strenuous activities. After she'd been pulled from fighting, she hadn't had time to drill or practice or even worry about her physical endurance.

Merlin, she was useless. If she ever found herself on a battlefield again, she'd probably be cut down in seconds.

Her breathing had evened, but she remained in place for another minute as she tried to will her heartbeat into slowing.

The door behind her abruptly wrenched open, and she toppled backwards into the shack.

Her head banged into the wood and stars flashed before her eyes as she discovered Malfoy staring down at her, enraged.

"The fuck, Granger, what are you doing?"

"Malfoy?" she said, staring up at him in confusion. "What are you doing here?"

“What am I doing here?” He snarled. “You activated the wards. I assumed you needed me for something.” “Oh,” Hermione said, heat staining her cheeks. “I didn’t realize the monitor ward extended beyond the room. I didn’t mean to bother you.”

She rolled over and stood up.

Malfoy looked her up and down.

“What were you doing?”

“I needed fluxweed harvested under a full moon,” she said, finding that she was still panting slightly. “And there were werewolves. I couldn’t wait until next month. So I had to run away and try gathering as I went. But I’m not very fit anymore. It winded me. This was the closest place to apparate to. So I was trying to get my breath back.” “Where were you getting fluxweed?” His tone had an edge to it.

She gestured over here shoulder. “There’s a field near here, in the Forest of Dean. It’s one of the places I usually go to find potion ingredients.”

“Usually—”

There was a pause.

“You wander the countryside at night. Foraging?” His expression had become frozen.

“Yes.” Hermione nodded, eying him. “I mentioned this.”

“No... You said you were getting potion ingredients. I assumed that meant you had a supplier.” His expression was growing hard and his eyes were accusing as though she’d lied to him.

Hermione stared at him with disbelief. “I’m a terrorist. It costs a small fortune to buy potion ingredients off the black market. I’m not going to waste my budget when I can get it for free and at better quality by doing the work myself.”

“So you’re traipsing about the countryside of magical Britain, at night, to gather potion ingredients? Alone?”

“Obviously,” Hermione said, sniffing. “That’s why we meet on Tuesday mornings after I finish.”

There was a long silence.

“You cannot.” He announced it in a tone of finality. “You will stop. You will stay inside whatever sad little safehouse they keep you healing in, and you will not go foraging again.”

Hermione stared at him indignantly for several astonished seconds. “I will most certainly not! You don’t control what I do.”

His expression hardened, a predatory glint appearing in his eyes. “I do, actually. Have you forgotten? I own you. If I tell you to sit in this room and stare at the wall until next week, you gave your word that you’d do it.”

Hermione felt rage bloom through her. “No, I wouldn’t. Because you gave your word not to interfere with my work in the Order. Foraging is part of my work. It’s non-negotiable. If you want to control everything I do, you’ll have to wait until we win. You gave your word too.” Malfoy stood

glaring at her, his eyes calculating. Then he abruptly changed the subject. “So, you outran werewolves?”

She flushed.

“No. I mean—they weren’t very close until the end. I only ran maybe a hundred yards at most.” “And you’re still panting from that?” he said sceptically.

“I—I don’t really do any fieldwork aside from foraging. There’s not much of a need to work on my stamina,” she said, drawing herself up defensively.

Malfoy’s mouth suddenly dropped open; he snapped it shut and dropped a hand over his eyes for several seconds as though trying to compose himself. Then he dragged his hand away and stared at her.

“When exactly was the last time anyone drilled you? I assume you practise basic duelling, given you’re so important they won’t let you fight anymore. Surely, since they let you go out, alone, in the middle of the night; your defence must be second to none.”

Hermione dropped her eyes and fidgeted with the strap of her satchel. “I’m very busy. Part of the reason they pulled me from combat is because there are a lot of other things I’m needed for.”

“How long has it been, Granger?” His voice was hard.

She glanced around the room. The stupid place didn’t even have anything she could pretend to be looking at. She focused on a knot in the floorboards.

“It’s—probably been about two and a half years,” she said quietly.

He dropped his face into his hand and was silent, as though he couldn’t even bear to look at her.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Well, I’ll be going then,” she said at length in a crisp voice. “Sorry I bothered you. It won’t happen again.”

“I’m training you,” Malfoy said abruptly, straightening and glaring down at her.

“What?” She stared at him in confusion.

“I’m going to train you,” he said slowly. “Since getting you to stop is apparently not an option. I won’t waste my time dealing with a new contact in the Order because you aren’t smart enough to stay in fighting condition. Given the way they all fight, I’m sure anyone else I got would be shite at occlumency and likely to eventually be picked up in a skirmish.”

Well, Malfoy’s Slytherin self-preservation instinct was certainly still strong. Hermione sighed with irritation.

“It’s really not necessary. I don’t fight. There are rarely any issues when I’m foraging. You needn’t worry that you’ll be inconvenienced by losing your precious war prize.”

“Really?” he said, his voice airy as he stepped toward her. “You don’t want to? Because you’ll be done learning occlumency shortly. I would think you’d prefer to fill your time with duelling practice rather than some of the other activities I could demand you participate in.” Hermione glared at him.

She doubted he had any intention of following through with his thinly veiled threat given that he'd shown no particular inclination. If he wanted to teach her duelling, there was no harm in it. She certainly would prefer it. She needed to keep spending time with him. She wouldn't be able to succeed in her mission if they weren't spending time with each other.

"Fine," she snapped, her expression twisting in faint derision.

"You look so bitter," his expression was vicious with mockery. "You'd think I just demanded you fuck me rather than not. Disappointed?"

"Only in your dreams," she said, shooting him a glare.

"Every night."

She rolled her eyes.

"Do you buy all your company?" she said, her voice sweet and her expression condescending. He didn't even blink.

"I enjoy professionalism," he said blandly, staring up at the ceiling as though he were reciting a mantra. "Clear lines. No drama. I'm not obliged to pretend that I care."

He sneered at the last word, as though caring were the most offensive concept known to man.

"Of course. How very you."

"Quite," he agreed with a thin smile.

There was a silence. Hermione wanted to tell him he was vile, but she was certain he already knew. She felt tired and it made her want to be cruel.

"Do you talk to them and cry, telling them about how sad and lonely your life is? Or just bend them over without a word?" she asked, her voice lilting with the taunt.

His eyes flashed.

"Want me to show you?" His voice was sharp and cold as a splinter of ice.

Hermione's near run-in with the werewolves had the adrenaline still spiking through her. She was used to the high stress of the hospital ward, but it was always someone else's life. She felt high on the rush from her near brush with death. She understood Harry suddenly. She felt like she could do anything.

A sudden thought came to her at Malfoy's threat.

She stared up at him, raising her chin.

"You won't." His eyes got cruel, but before he could respond she continued. "It would be too real for you. Doing it with someone you know. Someone you'd see again. It would mess with those clear lines."

"Testing me, Granger?" His voice was low and caressing.

She stared at him. "I suppose I am," she said coolly, but her heart was beginning to pound at the realisation of what she'd just done.

He leaned down, his eyes hard, until his face was centimetres from her own.

“Strip.”

Hermione didn’t waver and neither did he, so he stepped slowly closer until she shuffled back. He loomed over her. His eyes glittered.

“It’s killing you, isn’t it? Wondering. You expected me to do this to you right off. So waiting —trying to guess when I might get around to it—that bothers you more than the thought of actually having to fuck me.”

He sneered. “Well—you have my attention. Strip.”

Hermione stared up at him, feeling her face grow hot even as the rest of her body became increasingly cold.

“You don’t even want me. Why did you include me in your demands? What is the point?” she asked. Her voice was angry and confused.

He smirked. “You’re right. I don’t want you.”

It shouldn’t have hurt to hear him say it, but somehow it did. Especially set with the vindictive mockery in his expression as he stared down at her.

“However, owning you is never going to get old. ‘Now and after the war.’ I can’t wait to see how bitterly I can make you regret those words. So, strip.” His voice dropped low. “Or did you want me to do it for you?”

Hermione’s hands went up to the collar of her shirt and she gripped it defensively. She was terrified and enraged to the point she thought she might start crying. He did own her. She’d agreed to it. Her jaw trembled and her hands started shaking.

“Power gets you off, doesn’t it?” Her voice shook with rage as she forced herself to unfasten the top button on her shirt. “Hurting someone who can’t—or won’t—fight back. Using what people care about to torture and cage them, and force them to do things. You are just the same as Voldemort.”

The malice in Malfoy’s expression abruptly vanished and he paled. The check on his rage suddenly disappeared and darkness and magic poured off of him in waves, filling and writhing through the air.

The ice-cold fury that appeared in his expression was staggering. His eyes turned black, his lips curled in a snarl, and he kept getting paler and paler as he stared at her.

Hermione’s eyes widened in terror and she cringed away, bracing herself.

There was a tidal wave of fury rising up around him.

“Get out!” he snapped.

She stared at him, unmoving. Like an animal petrified by fear. He snarled with rage. Suddenly the door to the shack slammed open so violently the hinges snapped and it plummeted to the floor.

“GET OUT!” he roared.

Hermione did not need further invitation. She bolted for the door and apparated the second she felt herself clear the wards.

When she got through the door at Grimmauld Place, she collapsed onto the floor of the foyer, shaking with terror.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. She berated herself, trying to force herself to breathe. She felt like she was having a panic attack.

She couldn't understand what had prompted her to try provoking him. If it weren't the middle of the night she would have banged her head into the floor with frustration over her idiocy.

After all the countless times she had scolded Harry, warning him about the consequences of his stupid thrill-seeking; she might have him beaten.

She was an idiot.

She pressed her hand over her pounding heart and dropped her face into the crook of her elbow. She whimpered quietly.

Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus.

Except she hadn't tickled a sleeping dragon. Her actions appeared to have been more in the realm of waltzing up and smacking it upside the head with a beater bat.

They needed Malfoy. They desperately needed him, and a bit of adrenaline made her lose her head.

He was right, she couldn't handle the dread. The constant anticipation. Exhausting herself wondering about what it was he wanted. What he intended to do to her. Constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop. It was eating her alive. If he was going to hurt her or fuck her, she just wanted to know and have him do it.

Going to him every week, uncertain of what he might do to her next—

It was breaking her to pieces.

She bit down on her lip as she huddled against the door. She tried not to burst into tears as her rush of norepinephrine lost its hold on her, and she found herself sharply dropped low. She was awash in horror and despair.

She buried her face in her hands and sobbed quietly.

Her anxiety had quite possibly just cost the Order the war. Or at least countless lives.

She had to find a way to fix it.

She wrapped her arms around herself, and tried to calm down and think.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. When her chest finally stopped stuttering, she stood up and brushed away the tears.

She made her way up to her potion supply closet, she stored the fluxweed and spent several minutes trying to organise her thoughts and force her hands to stop shaking.

She went on to her room.

The door was ajar. Which was odd, because both she and Ginny were generally fastidious about keeping their door shut and locked. Grimmauld Place wasn't broadly accessible to the Resistance, but there were occasionally nosy individuals with little respect for privacy or personal possessions.

Hermione peeked in and then jumped back in surprise.

Ginny and Harry were half-naked and, if they weren't already, they appeared mere seconds from shagging.

Hermione cast a quick privacy charm on the door and hurried away. On the landing of the steps she paused and hesitated. Grimmauld's rooms were crammed currently. A number of the older children from Caithness had been brought there.

The parlour downstairs was currently occupied by all the insomniacs. There weren't many places left to sleep.

She was so tired. Her bout of crying left her feeling internally hollow.

She crawled into a window seat and tried to drift off, but her mind wouldn't quiet itself. She kept replaying her conversation with Malfoy. Fretting over the potion she needed to brew. Re-living the moment all the rage poured off Malfoy and he roared at her. He hadn't hurt her.

He'd had every opportunity and more than sufficient fury, but he'd held it back and driven her off instead.

A murderous Death Eater with some sort of moral code. An oxymoron if ever there were one.

It had to be connected to his motive for aiding the Order.

What did he want?

It aggravated her deeply that she couldn't figure it out.

After tossing about on the window seat for half an hour, she sat up with a sigh. She didn't want to try brewing Severus' potion until she was rested. She clambered up and went to the uppermost floor of the house. There was a practice room there.

She looked in and found it empty.

She made her way into the middle of the room and, drawing her wand, began making her way through some of the duelling poses.

When she'd returned from her healer training throughout Europe, she'd only participated in two small skirmishes before the Order decided the pull her permanently from combat. After the years away she'd gotten rusty, far less proficient in duelling than anyone else in her age group. The rest of DA were fast and cast powerful spells, dodging and weaving while maintaining excellent precision even from a distance. Healing was subtle. It almost always required holding back. Close work with attention to tiny details.

Trying to duel again was such a reversal in the technique that she'd been awful.

Ron and Harry devoted quite a bit of time trying to help her catch up, but before she'd managed to do so, Kingsley advised pulling her entirely from combat. No one made so much as a murmur in

disagreement.

Hermione understood the rationale, but years later the decision still hurt. She'd felt as though she'd failed somehow and was being shunted off—away from everyone else.

The original DA had become a tight-knit combat unit that she was not a member of.

Hermione bit her lip and cast a protego as powerfully as she could. The shield bloomed in front of her.

She sighed in relief as she withdrew the spell. At least she could still manage that.

She cast a series of hexes at the dummies across the room. Half of them hit their targets. None of them precisely. She flushed and tried again. She was somehow worse the second time.

Hermione berated herself. She was standing still. Not on a battlefield. Not while having any spells directed back at her.

She was shite.

In the unlikely event that Malfoy trained her, he would tear her to pieces for how inept she'd become.

She squared her shoulders and tried again.

She cast a few more complex curses.

Well, she could manage that.

It wasn't a lack of proficiency when it came to combat magic. She was simply terrible at the actual combat aspect.

That was some consolation.

Well, not really.

She kept going until she was so tired her hands were shaking from exhaustion. Then she dropped onto one the training mats and fell asleep.

"Hermione, bloody hell? Why are you in here?"

Hermione squinted the next morning and found Ron standing over her, flanked by Ginny, Neville, Dean, Seamus, Lavender, Parvati, Padma, Fred and Angelina.

She sat up with a groan and rubbed her eyes.

"'My bed got taken in the rehousing shuffle," she lied, shooting Ginny a look. "I came here to sleep." "Oh," said Ron. "Well, we're going to be practising an attack formation before Neville and Seamus have to head out on that recon mission. So—we need the room."

Hermione nodded and stood.

"Can I watch?" she found herself asking.

Ron furrowed his forehead and stared at her.

“Sure. I guess. If you have time for it. Just—keep a shield up. Lot of hexes will be going.

Hermione backed into a corner and watched Ron lay out the strategy. She couldn’t track all the terms they used. It wasn’t traditional combat terminology, rather a sort of shorthand that had evolved among the fighters over time. Their own language. As they scattered across the room, she cast a shield around herself. Ron activated one of the wards on the room with a charm, and then everyone started casting a series of hexes toward the walls.

The spells bounced off and ricocheted back and forth across the rooms. Soon the room was full of flying magic.

Hermione watched as the DA members began running through the attack formation. Their spells were all precise. Their shields powerful. None of them even got nicked by the flying spells. It was instinctive for them. They knew when their shields needed to be renewed. They knew how everyone else fought; who would cover for them. They fought closely and cast nonverbally.

Their combat skills were vastly superior to her own. It would take a miracle for her to catch up.

She watched them run through the formation twice before she turned and slipped out of the practice room.

She went to her potion supply closet, gathered up the ingredients, and got ready to begin brewing.

The following Tuesday she apparated into Whitecroft and approached the location of the shack slowly.

She wondered if Malfoy would be there. She prayed that he would.

She had no idea how to fix things if he refused to even appear. She could only hope that whatever was causing him to spy was sufficient motivation that her actions couldn’t dissuade him.

If he weren’t there, she would wait.

If he was there—she hoped he would just punish her and get it over with, rather than force her to continuously dread it.

The door had been repaired. She braced herself and pushed it open.

Empty.

After waiting for a minute she went over to the chair by the table. Her stomach was twisting itself in dread, and she tried to distract herself by reciting arithmancy formulas while she sat there.

She just needed to stop thinking about what might happen next.

Suddenly there was a sharp crack and she stood and turned sharply as Malfoy appeared. He stood staring at her, his expression indecipherable.

Hermione didn’t say anything. She just looked at him. She was relieved she wasn’t trembling. She forced herself to meet his gaze. That needle-like sensation of terror began lacing through her spine. She suddenly felt cold. She could feel the hair on the back of her neck stand on end as she braced herself.

She could see his jaw clench and he glanced away from her.

He was apparently not intending to speak first.

She took a deep breath. She needed him. He was clearly still furious with her but she had to fix it. Whatever it took.

“I’m sorry,” she said desperately. “I lost my head and crossed a line. I’m sorry. Whatever I need to do to make it up—I’ll do whatever you want. Just let me fix this.”

*Flashback 6*

**April 2002**

Draco looked sharply at her, something she couldn't read flickering across his expression.

"It's fine," he said in a hard voice. "When I said I wanted you willing, that meant you were allowed to say no. Although perhaps try saying it instead of purposely provoking me."

Hermione stared at him in shock.

He clenched his hand into a fist and pressed it against his forehead as though he had a headache.

"Do you want to continue with occlumency?" he asked.

Hermione shifted slightly but didn't answer. She felt knocked off kilter. The conversation hadn't—she didn't—

What did he mean?

Was it possibly a feint, so he could catch her off guard?

If she were allowed to say no to things, he certainly hadn't bothered to communicate that to her. In fact he'd heavily implied the opposite. Although—he hadn't really done much that wasn't primarily to just to provoke her.

So—

She eyed him warily.

Something that she said to him that night had accidentally struck a nerve. Deeply.

What had she said?

That power got him off. Hurting someone who couldn't—or wouldn't—fight back. Using what people cared about to torture and cage them and force them to do things. That he was just the same as Voldemort...

That he was just the same as Voldemort.

That was probably it. He probably regarded himself as better than his Master. Maybe he thought that if he helped the Order overthrow Voldemort that it would leave a vacuum of power that he could fill.

The thought made her insides twist. Was that really it? Was he playing both sides against each other, thinking that he could seize power in the aftermath?

Perhaps he objected to Voldemort's reign of terror; the attacks used to frame the Order, and all the torture and experiments. Malfoy probably imagined he'd rule in a genteel manner where women

were ostensibly “willing” and executions were ceremonial.

Yet—it seemed like he’d been more than just offended. His rage—the rage he carried was surely larger than merely ego or ambition. Her wary expression seemed to annoy him. He hissed slightly and his teeth flashed.

“Suffice to say, I’m not going to hurt you,” he ground out. “So stop looking at me as though you expect me to curse you in the back.”

The words made Hermione flinch. If she weren’t so desperate to ensure that he’d keep spying for them, she would have sneered and asked why he hadn’t made such an allowance for Dumbledore. He seemed to see the retort in her expression and his jaw twitched.

She bit her tongue and glanced awkwardly around the shack. “I do want to finish learning occlumency.”

“Alright.”

His tone was clipped, and he appeared to have boxed in his anger. His face smoothed into that cold, indolent mask once more. But his silver eyes continued to study her. She could almost feel his gaze against her skin.

He moved toward her.

He felt simultaneously the same, and yet different. As though he were going through the same motions, but more consciously than he had in the past. There was a subtle element of over-precision.

He tilted her head back with his fingertips. When she looked deep into his eyes, she could see a bitterness that she didn’t think had been there before.

He sank painlessly into her mind.

It was more of the same for the next two weeks. More occlumency and a reserved Malfoy. Conversation remained stilted, although the intelligence he provided continued to flow generously and remained sound.

Hermione berated herself internally each week as he apparated away after exchanging less than a dozen words with her.

Her psychological sketch of him had stalled. Each week, she added more questions with no answers. The list of potential motives ranged from the magnanimous to the monstrous. She could tell that she was almost done with occlumency training. Malfoy’s invasions of her mind were growing agonizingly painful and aggressive as he tested her technique and abilities.

She was tempted to ask if he still intended to train her in dueling, but she was afraid to bring up the subject.

She was beginning to feel desperate.

When she got to the shack she paced nervously, trying to come up with some way of breaking through the awkwardness. There had to be some way to get through to him. Some weakness she could find to get inside.

Malfoy appeared in front of her with an abrupt crack, and seemed to wince slightly as he straightened.

Hermione had seen that subtle expression often enough to identify it immediately, no matter how carefully concealed. Without even pausing to think, she whipped her wand out and cast a rapid diagnostic on him.

Before she could glance down for the results, Malfoy lunged forward, knocked her wand away, and had her pinned to the wall.

“What are you doing?” he snarled.

Right. He probably wasn’t in the habit of letting people cast magic in his direction.

She met his eyes steadily. “You’re hurt.”

He snatched his hands away from her and stepped back.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “I’ll have it taken care of later.”

Hermione’s eyes dropped down to the colours and details surrounding her wand, lying on the floor a few feet away, reading the most obvious parts.

“You’ve got several fractured ribs, a concussion, and internal bruising. It’ll take me ten minutes to fix it. And—“ she gave him a pointed look, “apparating will hurt even more the next time. If you leave the fractures and keep doing it, your ribs may fully break. You could puncture a lung. If there are shards, the ribs would have to be removed and regrown.”

He stared at her for several moments before rolling his eyes. “Fine.”

She knelt down and grabbed her wand. “Strip—from the waist up.”

He went still for a moment.

“I thought that was my line,” he finally said as he reached up stiffly and unfastened his cloak, letting it pool in a careless heap on the floor. “If you wanted me so badly, you only needed to ask.” He leered at her in an overtly fake way.

Everyone had methods for handling pain. Harry got very quiet, while Ron would become what Fred and George had termed “bitchy.” Seamus and Charlie swore in such volume and length that they had to be silenced.

Pain clearly made Malfoy even more sarcastic than he already was.

At least that meant he was talking to her again.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Yes. Nothing gets me going like the sight of an abdomen mottled with purple and green bruising.”

“I always knew you were a sadistic bitch.”

The comment caught Hermione so off-guard she burst out laughing.

Malfoy appeared astonished by the success as he began unbuttoning his shirt and awkwardly trying to shrug it off.

He had a shoulder injury too.

She reached out slowly like she were approaching a defensive animal. He didn't flinch away, so she set to pulling his shirt off of him gently and taking in the damage.

He appeared to have been flung, extremely violently, into—something.

His shoulder had been dislocated, but he must have popped it back in place. His entire right side was completely covered in bruises. It was remarkable that his arm wasn't shattered.

"What happened?" she inquired with sincere curiosity.

"New pack of werewolves," he answered shortly. "There were leadership issues."

"So, what? You fought a werewolf alpha?" she asked skeptically as she started repairing his ribs.

"Well, he was strictly forbidden from biting or clawing, and I wasn't allowed to kill him. But —when you've got beasts with a pack hierarchy and you try to run them without beating them into submission first, you're just waiting for an insurrection," Malfoy explained as though such things were common knowledge.

"Is all this from winning or losing?" she asked as she repaired the fracture on another rib.

He glared at her. "Winning, obviously. I wouldn't have been apparating anywhere if I'd lost. Fucking animal didn't even think to use his wand. They all go feral once they start running in packs."

He rolled his eyes as he said it and then added "Now I'm ostensibly the alpha of a werewolf pack. Adds to my natural charm, I think. " "The alpha is sure to try to kill you," Hermione pointed out.

Malfoy snorted. "He's welcome to try. It will take me less than a minute to take him down once I'm allowed to kill him." He sneered.

Hermione didn't reply. With a nonverbal spell she summoned her satchel and pulled out the emergency kit she always kept with her.

"Sit down and drink this," she instructed as she handed him a potion. "It'll deal with the concussion you have."

While he was downing it, she rubbed her hands together to warm them and then dipped her fingers into a small jar of paste.

She eyed him thoughtfully for a moment before lightly setting her hand on his bare shoulder.

He nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Relax," she said, feeling the muscles in his shoulders grow taut beneath her fingers. "It won't sink in well if you're tense."

Malfoy didn't relax at all.

She rolled her eyes.

She drew her fingers lightly over his shoulder, spreading the paste and letting him get used to the contact. The muscles in his shoulders flinched and twinged slightly. It reminded Hermione of

petting a skittish horse.

Of all the contexts in which she had imagined Malfoy eventually half-naked in her presence, healing him had surprisingly not been one of them. But—she could use this to patch things and continue working on her initial strategy.

He was assuredly lonely. He seemed unsettled by physical contact that wasn't either violent or sexual.

She supposed that wasn't surprising. Who was there to be kind to him? By his account his brutal training with Bellatrix had been unimpeded by anyone, even his mother. The thought made her shiver slightly.

Crucioing a sixteen year old to teach him occlumency and then leaving him to pass out from it.

She could use that emptiness. That loneliness. The need for comfort was written into the human psyche. Malfoy might not even be conscious enough of the absence to be defensive. If she awakened that need—

—she'd be in. Non-sexual physical contact was something she was comfortable with. Touching bodies. Being soothing and comforting. It was, she realised, an unexpected advantage she held over Malfoy. He liked clear lines. She would blur them and then slip through the gaps.

She leaned forward, just slightly, so that her mouth was close to his ear. His skin smelled faintly of salt, along with subtle, biting undertones of oakmoss and the sharp green scent of papyrus.

"This will hurt a bit," she said softly.

Then she began to knead the muscle in order to force the healing paste deep into the tissue and restore the stretched tendons. If she didn't get it to sink in fully, the damage could become permanent and Malfoy might become prone to getting his shoulder dislocated.

"Fuck," he groaned. "You are a bitch."

Her hands stilled for a moment before she resumed.

"The claim has been made before," she noted quietly.

That response seemed to catch Malfoy slightly off-guard. He subsided and clenched his jaw while she continued. Within a minute she was done but she continued massaging his shoulder. Gently. In a way that was—strictly speaking—not medically necessary.

After an extra minute, she paused with her hands resting lightly on his shoulder.

"I need to finish up with your ribs now. It's easiest if you lie back."

He sighed, and lay down on the floor. She stuffed his cloak behind his head, and shifted herself around so that she was sitting beside him.

He was staring at her with intense suspicion.

She busied herself with her healing kit, and fished out a large vial of serum. After a quick spell to clean the paste off her hands, she poured the viscous liquid into her palm. She spread it across his arm, side, and chest in small circular motions. She took note of where it vanished fastest, and added

an additional layer of serum.

With her free hand she cast a new diagnostic charm. He had a kidney contusion too. She sighed faintly.

“You’ve got a bruised kidney. I don’t have the potion for it with me, so you’ll have to go see a healer for that. It’s not severe, but it’ll hurt for a few days if you don’t get it taken care of.”

The bruises on his chest were slowly vanishing beneath her fingers. As they did, the circular motions she was drawing grew gradually slower as she appraised him.

He was—quite attractive. Physically. He must have a genetic propensity toward low body fat because all the muscles in his torso and arms stood out with stark definition. His whole body was hard and angular, without even a hint of softness. He wasn’t a bodybuilder, but he was—fit.

Most men had at least a layer of fat cushioning their flesh before meeting muscle. Despite how strong all the Weasley boys were, their muscle definition was generally somewhat faint beneath their skin. Harry had an eternal propensity toward scrawniness, regardless of his physical condition.

It wasn’t surprising, she supposed. Lucius Malfoy was well-built and far from portly, while Narcissa had been thin as a lath.

She studied Malfoy thoughtfully.

“Do you leer at all your patients, or am I special?” Malfoy abruptly drawled.

She started and blushed.

“I wasn’t,” she said defensively. “I was just wondering about your body fat ratio.”

“Of course you were,” Malfoy said snorting.

She withdrew her hands.

“You’re done,” she told him quietly.

He sat up and rotated his shoulder as he studied her repair work on his ribs. Then he drew his shirt back on, and rebuttoned it quickly.

Hermione looked away and began packing up her healing kit.

“So—how does a person beat a werewolf without killing him?” she inquired.

“A *Bombarda Maxima* with the wandpoint against his eyeball seems to do the trick,” Malfoy said casually as he picked up his cloak and stood. “But you have to let them get that close. Which obviously did not go entirely as planned.”

She stared at him.

“You blew up his eye?”

“It would have killed a wizard, but werewolves never know when to die.”

“He is most assuredly going to try to kill you,” Hermione told him seriously.

“I’m counting on it,” he said savagely.

She rolled her eyes and stood up. “So. More werewolves. Any other information?” He wandlessly conjured a scroll.

“A few new non-lethal curses your Order might deign to use without impugning their precious consciences. Details on a new prison in Cornwall. Also, the Dark Lord is considering making his name into a taboo. You may want to warn all your foolhardy fighters against throwing it around as a demonstration of their Gryffindor courage.”

Hermione accepted it, and he turned to go.

“Thanks for the patch job, Granger.”

He vanished.

Hermione glanced around the shack for a moment before slipping the scroll into her satchel.

She had healed Draco Malfoy.

She had healed loads of people, but somehow healing him felt different.

For a few minutes he hadn’t felt like a Death Eater. He had simply been a person who was in pain.

A person.

She wasn’t used to thinking about him in that way.

It felt safer to make him impersonal. A concept in her mind.

Death Eater. Murderer. Spy. Target. Tool.

That was how she preferred to categorise him.

Not as an injured person. Not someone who winced from fractured ribs. Not someone so unused to physical touch they flinched away reflexively. Not someone—attractive.

The interaction had appeared to patch the awkwardness; to bridge the space that had formed. But it had also carved away at the “otherness” that she had been able to apply to him; as her enemy, the murderer of Albus Dumbledore. The perspective that enabled her to think unflinchingly about potentially manipulating him into his grave.

Thinking about him as a person made him less of a monster in her mind.

She couldn’t allow herself to do that. It awakened the Hermione of Hogwarts, the fourteen year old girl who had knitted hats and started a Society for the Promotion of Elvish Welfare. That righteous teenager would be horrified by how her future self stood rationalising the strategic necessity of intellectually dehumanising Draco Malfoy.

Hermione’s hands shook slightly as she shuffled the thought into the back of her mind.

And—he had come to her as soon as she’d arrived. Despite his injuries. He’d come. She wondered if that meant something.

Hermione returned to Grimmauld Place and went immediately up to her room. Before walking in,

she peered surreptitiously around the door to ensure the room was empty.

Harry and Ginny were “not” together. Ginny had sought Hermione out several weeks before to assure her of that detail. It had simply been a fling. In the heat of the moment.

There was apparently a lot of heat, given that Hermione had nearly walked in on them a dozen times since.

Hermione, along with everyone else in Grimmauld, was feigning ignorance over Harry’s dramatically improved mood. He’d bound through the house like a joyous stag.

Hermione pulled her notebook from beneath her bed and muttered the counter-charms for the security measures she had placed on it.

She flipped through the pages carefully. Looking over everything she’d written, taking note of how her opinions and theories had evolved and scattered. She nibbled on the tip of her quill as she underlined a comment she had made weeks before.

*Lonely. Isolated.*

She was growing convinced that it was a central pillar to him. Dead mother. Insane father. Ambitious friends all devoted to their own self-preservation.

Whatever was driving Malfoy to cast himself off from Voldemort and throw in his lot with the Order was probably a secret from everyone.

There was no room for honesty and friendship while serving under the rule of a megalomaniac who was the most powerful legilimens in the wizarding world.

Hermione was almost certain that no one on Voldemort’s side knew Malfoy was a spy. He wouldn’t possibly risk it.

Hermione could be a safe repository for his secrets. If she got him to trust her. If her occlumency was good enough, he’d be able to rationalise it to himself. She’d turn his strengths into weaknesses she could capitalise on.

She poked her head under her bed in search of a psychology book she wanted to reference. As she looked over the books piled up, she stilled—

They had been moved.

The difference was slight, but she was certain. Someone had been snooping under her bed. She cast a detection spell that came back blank.

She looked back at her notebook. She cast a series of charms and analytic spells on it, looking for tampering. There were no signs. She stared under the bed again, and then around the room.

Kreacher.

The dratted elf rarely did more than sulk and insult people, but occasionally he would go on a half-hearted cleaning spree.

The room did appear to have been dusted. Ginny’s generally unmade bed had been straightened somewhat.

Hermione relaxed slightly, but she cast several extra spells on her books and a ward that would notify her if anyone were to disturb the books again. She also added a very thorough self-destruction spell on the notebook if it were tampered with by anyone.

As she was standing up to leave, Ginny walked in.

“You’re back early,” Ginny said.

Hermione glanced down at her watch. She was. Her meetings with Malfoy were regularly exceeding the allotted half-hour. It was the first time she’d returned before 8:30. Normally Hermione had to rush to store the potion ingredients before her 9:30 shift in the hospital ward.

“Lucky day,” Hermione said.

“Yeah,” said Ginny, looking slightly awkward. “Um. I wanted to—ask you about something.”

Hermione waited.

Ginny tugged nervously at her hair. She’d kept it cut in a bob just past her chin ever since a long ponytail had been grabbed during a battle, and she’d been nearly killed by a hag.

“I—well—you, obviously know about me and Harry,” Ginny said.

Hermione gave a short nod.

“Right. Well. The thing is, I want to be careful. I’ve been using the charm. But—there’s something about Prewetts; they’re not like other wizarding families. They just get pregnant somehow. Ron and I were both accidents after the twins came along. So—I was wondering if you’d make me a contraceptive potion. If you have the time. I was always rubbish at potions. If you can’t—that’s fine. I can ask Padma. I know you’re terribly busy. I just—I didn’t want you to think I didn’t want to ask you.”

“Of course. I’ll be brewing tonight anyway. It will be an easy thing include. Do you have a preference about taste? The most effective ones don’t taste very pleasant.”

“I don’t care what it tastes like if it works,” Ginny said boldly.

“Well, I’ve already got a few vials of one variety. I can give them to you now, if you’d like.” “You do?” Ginny blinked and stared at Hermione suspiciously. “Are you—?”

Hermione could see Ginny running a list of possible men in Hermione’s life.

“You’re not—with Snape, are you?” Ginny suddenly choked.

Hermione gaped.

“God—No!” she said, spluttering and waving her hands as though she were trying to ward something off. “I’m a healer! I keep a lot of things on hand. Good grief! What—why would you even—“

Ginny looked slightly abashed.

“He’s just the only person you ever seem to talk to for long. Aside from Fred, who’s with Angelina. Everyone else you just end up fighting with. And not in the hot and bothered, angsty sex later kind

of way."

"That doesn't mean I'm shagging him," Hermione muttered, feeling as though her face were about it burst into flames. "He's a colleague. I consult with him about potions."

"You just seem lonely," Ginny said, giving Hermione a long look.

Hermione started slightly and stared at Ginny.

"You don't talk to anyone anymore," Ginny said. "You used to always be with Ron and Harry. But even before you left to become a healer, you've seemed more and more alone. I thought—maybe you had someone. Granted, Snape would be a weird choice for a lot of reasons—but, it's a war. It's too much for anyone to handle alone."

"Cathartic shagging is Ron's thing. Not mine," Hermione said stiffly. "Besides, it's not like I'm fighting."

Ginny looked at her pensively for a moment, before saying "I think that hospital ward is worse than the battlefield."

Hermione looked away. She had sometimes wondered if it might be, but it had never been a question she could ask anyone.

Ginny continued "I think of it every time I'm in there. In the field—everything is so focused. Even when someone's injured. You just apparate them away and then head back. You win some. You lose some. You get hit sometimes. You hit back. You get days to recover if it's bad, or if your dueling partner dies. But in the hospital ward, every battle looks like losing. I'm always more traumatised after being in there than I am by fighting."

Hermione was silent.

"You don't ever get time off," Ginny added. "They can never spare you long enough to let you grieve. I know from Harry and Ron that you're still pushing for dark arts when you go to the Order meetings. I don't agree—but I get it. I realise that you see the war from a different angle from us. Probably the worst one. So—I'm just saying, if you had someone, I'd be really happy for you. Even if it was Snape."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"You should probably stop talking now if you still want that contraceptive potion," Hermione said with a glare.

Ginny snapped her mouth shut. Hermione grabbed her satchel off the bed.

"Come on. They're in my potion supply closet," Hermione said, walking out of the bedroom.

The vials were all stored up on the top shelf in a small box. Hermione pulled out a dozen and put them into a small pouch for Ginny.

"One a day. It's best if you take it at the same time every day. I'll make another batch this week and give you a month's supply."

"Thanks, Hermione."

Ginny slipped away, and Hermione packed the box back up onto the top shelf.

She had lied. Contraceptive was not a potion she kept on hand. It had been Hermione's personal supply which she had been taking as a precaution since the day after Moody approached her about Malfoy.

The next week Malfoy was in the shack when Hermione arrived. When she opened the door, he stared at her with an expression of mild irritation.

She looked at him confusedly.

"Am I late?" she asked glancing at her watch.

"No," he said, his tone clipped.

She closed the door awkwardly and waited.

"I think we're done with occlumency," he said after a minute.

"Alright."

She started to open her mouth to ask him if he intended to train her in dueling but then shut it again and waited. Something about his mood unsettled her slightly.

"We'll start with basic dueling so I can see how bad you are at it," he announced.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Fine," she said. "What are the rules?" "None for you. Do whatever you want," he said. "I'll restrict myself to stinging hexes. I want to see how long you can last."

Hermione blushed.

"I'll just tell you now I'm going to be awful," she said.

"Yes. I'm expecting that."

She glared at him, put her satchel on the floor by the door and placed a protective ward around it. Then she turned to face him.

He'd moved across the room and was leaning lazily against the wall.

"Alright."

He reached into his robes and withdrew his wand. She cocked her head to the side.

"That's not your wand from school, is it?" she asked.

He looked down and spun it in his fingers.

"No," he admitted. "My unicorn hair didn't handle the dark arts very well so I had to replace it. Still Hawthorn wood, but less yielding, with a dragon heartstring core. It's also a few inches longer."

He raised his eyebrows suggestively as he said the last line.

Hermione filed the information away for future analysis. She thought there was a book on wand

theory at Grimmauld Place in the Black library.

She got into dueling position. Malfoy straightened and entered the same position with a flourish.

Hermione had been trying to practice dueling whenever she could find the time to sneak into the practice room. She shot a nonverbal stunner at him and he deflected it easily with a shield as he shot a series of stinging hexes at her.

She cast her own shield rapidly and kept it in place with a fianto duri spell.

Malfoy cast an endless stream of hexes and carelessly knocked any spells she sent toward him without even moving.

Despite the low impact of the spell he was using, the rapidity with which he cast hexes was wearing down Hermione's shield.

Before she could recast her shield, he shot a low hex at her feet. She yelped slightly as she was struck on the ankle. It went rapidly downhill from there. She jumped backward without thinking, and left herself open. He immediately struck her with an additional five hexes.

"Alright!" she shouted. "You've won. Stop it!"

"That's not how it works, Granger," he drawled while continuing to nonverbally shoot hexes at her. "In the battlefield you win or you die. Or you run away."

Hermione physically dodged his spells and finally managed to recast her shield. She was standing gingerly on one foot. Her side, where he'd repeatedly struck her, was swelling and inflamed.

She angrily shot a slightly dark curse at him. Not anything deadly but more serious than a stunner.

Malfoy deflected it and quirked an eyebrow.

"The kitten has claws," he said with mock wonder.

"Oh, stuff it," she snarled as she cast a series of nonverbal spells in his direction.

"Good god, Granger, your aim is atrocious," he told her while still machine gunning her with stinging hexes. "I'm not even moving and you're missing me."

"I am aware."

"No wonder they pulled you from combat."

"Shut up!"

"Struck a nerve, have I?" he said dryly. His grey eyes were glinting, and she realised that he was punishing her for something. Whatever had been irritating him when she'd arrived, he was getting back at her for it.

Passive-aggressive wanker.

He wasn't even trying. He already knew she was rubbish. He was just doing it for his own personal amusement.

She spun away from his hexes and cast her shield again. She was already getting tired from the

combination of dodging and casting. She gripped her wand tighter and kept going until he struck her wand hand with so many hexes she couldn't hold it anymore.

Her wand fell to the ground. Rather than try to dodge, she just stood there as he struck her on the torso and legs with dozens more hexes.

Then he finally stopped and she stared at him. "Feel better now?" she inquired.

He smirked and put his wand away.

"I've wanted to hex you for years," he said with a satisfied gleam in his eyes.

"I already told you you could," she said in a wooden voice as she began mentally cataloging everywhere on her body she'd been struck. "But I suppose you like to pretend you're giving a sporting chance."

"It's not my fault you're so pathetic at defense."

"No. That's on me," she said quietly, lifting up her hand and wincing slightly as she tried to move her fingers.

The stinging hex was non-permanent in its damage, but it also couldn't be reversed magically. With the quantity and concentration Malfoy had used, it would take her more than a day before the pain from all the welts faded. She was certain he'd chosen the hex specifically because of that.

"For the record," she said, trying to keep her voice from shaking. "This qualifies as interfering with my work. So perhaps use a reversible hex, or keep it all to one location next time."

Malfoy said nothing.

"So—" she asked after a minute. "Do I get to know why?"

"When it comes to cursing you, Granger, your mere existence is reason enough."

She pressed her lips together, and swallowed hard. An aching sensation spread across her nose and cheeks and she blinked it away.

"Did you have any information this week?"

"No."

"Alright. Well, I'll be going then," she said, kneeling stiffly and picking up her wand with her left hand. Then she went over and pulled her satchel onto her shoulder, flinching slightly when the strap landed on several of the welts.

Malfoy didn't say a word as she walked out.

She stood outside the shack, feeling at a loss. Not at Malfoy's cruelty, but over what she was supposed to do. She couldn't go back to Grimmauld Place and have someone realise she'd been hexed. She'd have no explanation for it.

She walked gingerly over to the stump and sat on the edge of it. With a sigh, she pulled her satchel off her shoulder and began pulling sacks and bottles out. She'd have to throw away all of the potion supplies she'd foraged. They required careful storage in order to maintain their magical efficacy.

She wouldn’t be able to perform the necessary spellwork with her wand hand in its current condition.

She sadly dumped the murtlap tentacles onto the ground. She would have to snare and kill another one. And the fairy wings. Then she dumped out all the rest until she had nothing but a bundle of stinging nettles left.

With grimace, she snatched them up and pressed them against both ankles and all over both hands and wrists. Then she lightly brushed her face with the bundle as well. She dropped the nettles onto the ground and watched as the multitude of tiny welts blistered up across her skin and obscured all the hexes her clothes didn’t conceal.

With a sigh, she stood up, and holding her wand lightly, she apparated back to Grimmauld Place.

“Hermione? What happened to you?” Angelina inquired wide eyed as she walked in the door.

“I tripped and fell into a nettle patch,” Hermione lied.

“Oh golly.” Angelina stared at Hermione’s face until she began to blush faintly. “Anything you can do about it?”

“Unfortunately not. There aren’t any spells for nettle stings. They should fade in a day. But I couldn’t forage very well. So I’m going to have to go again tomorrow.”

“Too bad. Your poor face.”

Hermione shrugged mildly, “My hands are worse. I have to go tell Pomfrey. I’m not sure how much good I’m going to be in the hospital ward today.”

Because of Malfoy’s hexes, Hermione found herself unexpectedly with a free day. Not that she was able to enjoy it much without being able to use her hands. She couldn’t even bend her fingers enough to grasp and turn a page in a book.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d had time off. Any time she got time away from healing, she used it to brew some of the more complex potions, or restock her potion supplies.

She sat and stared out of the window in the attic, watching the passing muggles.

She wondered what it was that had provoked Malfoy.

She wondered if perhaps getting hexed by him might actually be a good sign. That it meant she was getting to him, and so he was lashing out defensively. Healing him the week before had been a shift in their interaction; he’d probably seen hexing her as a way to put her back in her place.

He was so vindictive. Occlumency training had hurt far more, but it had been constructive. There had been a point to the pain. There had been potions to deal with the migraines.

Hexing her had just been his nastiness.

It was a rubbish way to appraise her fighting abilities, because once he’d hit her with the hexes, she wouldn’t be able to start over for another week. If he’d wanted to test her aim or endurance, he could have just repeatedly immobilised or petrified or stunned her.

He hadn’t used any serious or permanent hexes, presumably because it brushed against that moral

code he was so conceited about. His ‘ethical line’. He didn’t like to think of himself as sadistic or vindictive. He probably told himself that he was giving her a sporting chance. That she deserved it each time she got hit because she should have dodged the spells.

He didn’t want to think of himself as cruel.

He probably thought he was better than that.

Hermione stared down at her hands.

On the grand scale of pain and cruelty, stinging hexes barely registered. Yet emotionally, she found the experience had devastated her more than she was prepared to admit.

She pressed her eyes into the crook of her arm as she tried not to cry.

The tears slipped out anyway.

*Flashback 7*

The next week, Hermione got up even earlier to go foraging. She took vials and trays, and fully prepared the potion ingredients before packing them away in her satchel. She couldn't afford to waste a week's supply again.

When she apparated to the shack she took several deep breaths, trying to brace herself before opening the door. She had concluded that there was a fairly decent chance that Malfoy would repeat the same dueling method again.

The cruel, satisfied glint in his eyes the week before as he'd stashed his wand made her expect it.

The room was empty when she arrived.

She set her satchel in a corner and warded it. Then she stood waiting. Her fingers kept nervously tapping against her leg. She felt almost faint.

She hated waiting. She hated being left to dread things. Her mind always began running wild with scenarios of what would happen. Usually her imagination was worse than reality.

But Malfoy had an unusual talent for blindsiding her.

He was nearly five minutes late.

She wasn't sure if she was supposed to keep waiting. He'd said he would only wait five minutes for her, but he'd never said anything about how long he expected her to wait for him. She didn't think he was going to abandon the Order just because he'd finally gotten to hex her.

She was nearly ill with anxiety. She couldn't—

She wasn't going to just sit there waiting for him to lash out at her again.

She turned abruptly and took the wards off her satchel and slung it over her shoulder. She was stepping through the door when he appeared in the room with a crack.

She stopped and stared. The mere sight of him gave her a sinking sensation. She felt like something was lodged in her throat and she could barely swallow around it.

He stared at her. He didn't look irritated. He looked—awkward.

"I'm late," he said.

She nodded and stepped back into the shack, closing the door. There was a pause.

"The same again this week?" she asked quietly, glancing away from him. "No." He said it so abruptly that she looked up sharply at him.

He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. It was the most overt gesture of discomfort she had ever seen from him.

“I—overstepped,” he said, which was not an apology. “I won’t do that to you again.”

“Alright,” she agreed automatically, not trusting him at all. She was sure that if given enough time, he would find some new vindictive action that he could rationalise.

He stared at her for several seconds. Hermione suspected she still had a slightly wounded expression on her face. For some reason, no matter how much occlumency she used, she wasn’t able to wipe it entirely away.

He opened his mouth as though he wanted to say something else, but then swallowed the words.

“What?” she asked bitterly. Bracing herself for whatever he was about to do next was the worst part.

“I—said I wasn’t going to hurt you,” he said in a low voice. “And then I did. I’m sorry.”

She looked at him in confusion. He was such a pile of contradictions.

“I always expected you would.”

His eyes flashed with irritation. Ah, she’d clearly offended his moral code again.

“And yet here you are,” he said.

“Yes.” She shrugged and met his eyes. “Because if the Order loses this war, I’m going to die. And Harry, and Ron, and Ginny, and everyone else that I know. So—being hurt by you doesn’t really matter.”

“No, I suppose not,” he agreed, his expression cold.

“If you’re going to do it again, just do it. Don’t make it a farce by having me try to fight it off,” she said woodenly. “Just own it.”

His mouth twisted slightly. His rage suddenly rose a little closer to the surface. Hermione braced herself.

He abruptly subsided.

“The first thing we need to work on is your aim,” he said, changing the subject.

“Alright.”

He drew his wand and conjured up a practice dummy. With the tip of his wand he carved an X in the center of it and then sent it across the room. “Whatever spells you want, just do ten. I want to see your accuracy rate,” he instructed her.

She put her satchel down and got into position beside him, feeling keenly aware of his proximity.

The target was about fifteen feet away.

She aimed for the X and cast a stunner, a petrification hex, several stinging hexes, and a immobilising spell at it. She hit it eight out of ten times but only got four directly on the X.

She stopped and braced herself for Malfoy’s scathing criticism. He was silent, which felt even worse.

“You do mostly close spellwork, don’t you?” he inquired at length.

“Yes,” Hermione said stiffly. “Thought so,” he said, and nodded thoughtfully. “Your spell technique is fine but you’re so precise you pay unnecessary attention to controlling your wand tip and then forget to focus on where you’re pointing. Hexes and curses don’t require that much fine motor control; most of them don’t have complicated wand movements. Your over-attentiveness is doing you a disservice in combat.”

“Oh…”

“On the upside, that’s a fairly easy thing to fix. It’s much harder to train a poor caster. Try a curse with a complicated wand movement and remember to aim your wand tip while you’re finishing it.”

Hermione cast about in her mind for a curse with a complicated movement. Malfoy was right, most curses were simple. Stabbing, slashing, there was rarely more to them than that. She hadn’t realized what a reversal in technique that detail was from healing.

A spell came to her.

Taking a deep breath, she whipped out the motion and made sure her wandpoint was over the X as the final words of the incantation slipped past her lips.

A scarlet light darted across the room and landed squarely on the X. Immediately, a small jet of hot, black tar exploded from spot where the spell had made contact. If it had been an actual person, the tar would have kept producing itself, but on a practice dummy it promptly ceased.

Malfoy chuckled. “My, my, Granger, does your Order approve of the curses you know?”

“No,” Hermione said in a bitter voice. There was no point in lying. The Death Eaters couldn’t possibly be unaware that the Resistance almost exclusively used non-lethal spells.

“I imagine not. Tell me, Granger, are you willing to kill someone?” Malfoy was staring intently at her as he asked. She looked up at him, meeting his eyes. He was only a few inches away from her. His expression reminded her of the moment before she’d kissed him. Intent. Amused.

“I don’t want to be cruel. But—if it’s between me or them, or to protect someone I care about, I’ll do it.”

He kept looking down at her for another moment, before smirking faintly. The cold deadliness of his eyes glimmered, and Hermione suddenly realized how very close to each other they were standing.

“I imagine you would,” he said quietly, then he turned to look at the target again. “Ten more spells. See if your accuracy improves now that you understand why you were missing.”

Hermione cast another series of simple hexes across the room and hit the dummy each time, six times directly over the X.

“Keep going,” Malfoy instructed her.

She kept casting but got distracted when he moved behind her, and she couldn’t see him anymore.

“Keep casting,” his voice was directly behind her.

Hermione steeled herself and tried to keep casting, but the nervousness of not being able to see him

while still able to feel that he was close put her on edge. Her spells went wide.

Malfoy reappeared on her other side. “Keep casting,” he said again.

She continued and her accuracy improved again.

“You’re too planted,” he finally said staring at her feet.

She glanced down.

“What is that?” he said, cocking his head to the side and looking snide, “A fencing pose?”

Hermione blushed and shuffled her feet.

“With dueling in a battlefield, particularly one without apparition wards, there isn’t really any advancing. You can be anywhere you damn well please so long as it gives you a clear shot of everyone else. The important thing is to be able to move quickly. An attack can come from any direction—unless you’ve got a dueling partner who’s covering for you. You have to be ready to move.”

He cast a spell across the room at the dummy.

“Stick to non-lethal spells now,” he said, “They’ll ricochet directly back to where they were cast from.” Hermione cast more slowly as she tried to keep on the balls of her feet and move rapidly away as soon as the spells left her wand. She got quite absorbed in it and half forgot that Malfoy was circling around behind her, watching her technique.

“Merlin, Granger, you’re so tense,” Malfoy muttered from directly behind her. She started and jumped so violently she moved back into the path of a stupefy that was flying back across the room.

*Rennervate*.

She awoke to find Malfoy kneeling over her with an expression of simultaneous amusement and aggravation.

“Tense—as I said,” he reiterated.

She sat up, shaking her head to clear it. She was unbruised—which implied that she hadn’t fallen to the ground. Malfoy had quite possibly caught her. The thought of Malfoy holding her while she was unconscious was terrifying. She wondered how much time had passed.

He stood and offered her a hand. She awkwardly accepted it and got up.

“Again,” he instructed, “And try not to hex yourself when I speak.”

She rolled her eyes and continued.

When her pace managed to increase from glacial to sloth-like, Malfoy decided it was sufficient progress for the day.

“Practice, if you can,” he said.

“I have been,” she said quietly. “I was even worse a few weeks ago. If you’ll believe it.”

Malfoy refrained from indicating whether he did or not. He just stared at her thoughtfully.

“You’re too scrawny,” he said. Hermione folded her arms defensively.

“There’s considerably more to fighting now than just dueling technique. Particularly if we’re primarily focused on keeping you alive while you go traipsing about the countryside. You’re more likely to meet hags or werewolves than a band of Death Eaters.”

“Well, there is always apparition,” she reminded him.

“No, there is not,” he said shortly. “As the dark creature population here in Britain continues to grow due to the war, there are anti-apparition wards being laid over huge swathes of the countryside. If it’s somewhere you’re likely to find magical ingredients then it’s likely that hags, or harpies, or vampires, or someone else is going to want to live there. There’s a very good chance you’re going to be wandering someday and discover that you can’t apparate away.” Hermione felt herself pale.

“Do you know where?” she asked.

“A few of them. I’m not in charge of it, and since no one else regularly goes ambling alone through dangerous forests before sunrise, most people don’t consider it very relevant information. So be careful. I’m assuming you aren’t going to stop.”

“I can’t.”

He stared at her, and gave a resigned nod. He withdrew a scroll and handed it to her.

“I’ll come up with some sort of fitness regime for you that won’t take up too much of your precious time and won’t draw attention.”

“Fine,” she agreed, not looking forward to such a thing at all.

Malfoy suddenly looked slightly awkward again.

“Was there anything else?” she asked.

With a flick of his wand, a large book bound in faded black leather appeared. He handed it to her.

She accepted it tentatively.

*Secrets of Darkest Arts.*

“You found it,” she said quietly.

“Hopefully it will be useful,” he said. Then he vanished.

Hermione slipped the book into her satchel and hurried back to Grimmauld Place.

She was elated that Malfoy had found it. It had been the only known book on horcruxes that she had been able to find any reference to. Slughorn has said that Hogwarts used to have a copy, but he had only admitted such details after the school had been shuttered and taken over by Voldemort.

Stashing all her prepared potion ingredients in her closet, she rushed into the library of Grimmauld Place to start reading.

Hermione had been away training as a healer when the revelation regarding Voldemort having horcruxes had been made. Horace Slughorn admitted that Tom Riddle had questioned him on the subject, and Severus had revealed that Dumbledore had been mortally wounded by a ring from the

Gaunt House.

Gradually the Order concluded that Voldemort had somehow created even more than one horcrux, although how he had done so was a mystery because no one knew how the dark objects even worked. It was, they were almost certain, the reason that Voldemort had been able to revive himself after trying to kill Harry as a baby. Tom Riddle's journal which had nearly killed Ginny had been one. The Gaunt Ring.

But they weren't sure if there were more than that, or what the objects were, or where they could find them.

They had created a timeline of Voldemort's life following his graduation from Hogwarts, trying to guess if there were other points at which Voldemort might have created more.

She read through the sections on horcruxes that the new book had. It detailed exactly how to create them. A murder was required to tear the soul, and then an incantation to remove the piece of the soul and bind it to another object. There was no mention of creating more than one. Hermione wondered whether the soul containers had to be inanimate or if they could potentially be living vessels, considering Voldemort's strange attachment to his snake Nagini.

She outlined all the information onto a scroll and then carefully placed everything into a warded briefcase. She slipped it beside the desk and left it for Moody to pickup. They tried to keep actual meetings limited to diffuse suspicion. There was no particular reason for Moody to meet with the Order's healer every week.

As she headed up to her room she evaluated Malfoy's interaction with her that day.

He'd apologised. It had been quite surprising.

She pulled her notebook out from under her bed and considered.

The previous week she had made a page in which she detailed her best guesses regarding Malfoy's moral code. She reread the comments she had made the week before.

*Better than Voldemort. Conceit in his morals. Believes in choice. Rationalises cruelty. Doesn't believe he is vindictive.*

She added a note, "*Considers his word somewhat binding. Tries to make amends when he thinks he has broken his rules."*

The book on horcruxes had probably been his way of trying to buy her forgiveness. She wondered if he'd been holding it for a while or had only gone to the trouble trying to obtain it because he'd felt guilty over hexing her so many times.

She added, "*Thinks forgiveness can be bought."* That was a very useful piece of information.

Then she closed the notebook and put it back under her bed, replacing the wards carefully.

She lay back on her bed and stared at the ceiling. She felt exhausted. She'd only gotten a few hours of sleep before getting up at four in the morning to go gather potion supplies.

She had run out of Severus' potion for the acid curse already. She had no more acromantula venom to make more. The curse was awful and slow healing. The damage it inflicted was immediate and

hard to reverse. The potion Severus had invented was an analgesic that helped to neutralise the acid and stop it from continuing to corrode the body once the curse was cancelled.

Severus had been correct about how easily it was used. A strong shield could stop it, but it had become the most frequent injury the hospital ward dealt with. It didn't matter where on the body it struck, the recovery was slow.

Hermione had brewed every single other analgesic and alkalising salve she could think of but their efficacy paled in comparison to the potion containing the acromantula venom.

She was getting so desperate she was considering trying to hunt down an acromantula. She knew that Voldemort had their service along with all the rest of the dark beings.

Her eyes suddenly popped open.

Perhaps Malfoy would be able to get his hands on some. If he still felt like he owed her a little, he might agree to it.

The next week her aim had improved considerably. She had been practicing with the ricochet charm on the practice dummies at Grimmauld Place and had grown more adept at moving around as she cast. Malfoy seemed vaguely pleased.

He critiqued her form more, and stalked around her scrutinising her technique in a way she found unsettling. When she finished, he handed her a scroll of things she was supposed to do in order to get in shape. Pushups and jumping and crunches and something called a burpee which Hermione vaguely recalled her cousin having once introduced to her. There were a half dozen other things included as well.

"Your aim has improved enough; getting your stamina up somewhere reasonable is more important. Whenever you have time, do repetitions of these," he said, gesturing at the scroll.

Hermione grimaced slightly but stuffed it into her satchel without a word.

"Any information?" she asked, looking up at him.

His expression hardened and his mouth twitched as though he was hesitating.

"The Dark Lord will be secretly out of the country for the next week. Which means that the response to Order activity will be somewhat delayed. If the Order has been waiting for an opening, it may be the edge they're looking for. I wouldn't suggest trying to retake the Ministry, but if the Order were to attack multiple prisons simultaneously, the response will be —less cohesive."

"I'll tell Moody," she said. Then she stared up at him and started to open her mouth.

He quirked an eyebrow and waited.

She almost asked him about acromantula venom, but lost her nerve. "I'll be going then," she said, dropping her gaze.

He apparated away before she was out the door.

*Flashback 8*

**May 2002**

The news regarding Voldemort's absence was the opportunity Moody and Kingsley had been waiting for.

They had been slowly sharing the blueprints, prison rotations, and other information that Malfoy had been supplying the Order with. Laying out plans. Waiting to strike.

They were ready.

Charlie, Harry and Ron had been urging for such an attack for months.

At long last, everything aligned.

It was the biggest coordinated attack ever made by the Resistance. Almost every fighter they had was brought in. They targeted several of the largest, most protected prisons, as well as the curse development division.

Hermione was so stressed leading up to it, she nearly had a nervous breakdown. Stocking the hospital. Brewing massive batches of all the crucial healing potions. Trying to be prepared for anything.

There was a terrifying doubt, deep down, that she might have sent the Resistance to its doom. That it was possibly all a long elaborate trap, laid by Voldemort and Malfoy.

She kept replaying Malfoy's momentary hesitation, wondering whether it had been a sign of betrayal.

Everyone else left and Hermione, Poppy, and a handful of other healers waited nervously in Grimmauld Place. Waiting to hear anything.

Hermione nearly wore a hole in the floor of the foyer with pacing until the bodies started pouring in.

It was a flood of dying and injured people.

Her clothes and hands were drenched in blood, and the entire house was converted into a hospital in order to accommodate everyone.

She barely believed it when she was informed hours later that it had all been a spectacular success. The Order broke several hundred prisoners free and reduced the prisons and the curse division to rubble as they fled.

At the advice of Severus, the Order raided the labs of the curse division and brought back a huge haul of many rare and incredibly valuable potion ingredients that Hermione had been unable to get her hands on for years; including an entire flagon of Acromantula venom. Hermione nearly wept when Padma Patil handed it to her.

The condition of the survivors brought from the curse division was horrific. They were so horribly tortured and cursed that many were insane. Their bodies destroyed and ravaged beyond repair. There was no recovery for most of them; she could only ease their pain and hope they'd die quickly.

The animosity toward Severus among the younger Order and Resistance members aware of his role in the curse division spiked to an explosive extent. Moody had to exclude Severus from Order meetings in order to maintain peace.

For the uninjured fighters, the coordinated attack was accomplished in less than a day. But for Hermione and anyone else with even a scrap of healer training, it was only the beginning.

They were run ragged trying to care for the inundation of horrifically injured and malnourished people abruptly thrust into their care, in addition to all the injuries sustained during the attack.

They moved the basic injuries out of Grimmauld Place as rapidly as possible, to free beds for the complex curses and wounds that required Hermione's specialised care.

It was weeks before Hermione could be spared to forage or liase. Malfoy had, in the meantime, summoned her urgently twice to retrieve notes he'd left, warning of impending counter-attacks. Voldemort had been enraged by the blow and struck back at the Resistance forcefully. Godric's Hollow was burned to the ground, both the muggle sections and the magical. Voldemort strung together and hung the bones of Lily and James Potter from a gallows for the Order to find when they arrived.

Voldemort scattered vicious attacks across Muggle England; swamping Hermione with a flood of cursed Muggles that she had to stabilise before the Order obliviated them and turned them over to recuperate in Muggle hospitals.

Hermione pulled twenty-four hour hospital shifts with four hour breaks for sleep until her magic gave out entirely toward the end of the third week.

Poppy had dragged her out of the hospital ward and told Moody that if he didn't want Hermione to die or permanently injure her magic, then he and Kingsley would find healers to cover for her.

Hermione suspected that Kingsley took several healers from St Mungo's hostage for the two days when she was recovering. Poppy refused to meet her eyes or answer the question when Hermione had asked who subbed for her. After nearly a month, things finally calmed slightly.

Hermione had run out of most of the locally foraged potion ingredients. She had headed out. In the lushness of late June she was able to restock most of her supplies quickly before going to meet with Malfoy. She had barely had time to think of him during the last several weeks.

He appeared the moment she stepped through the door. As he did, his expression twisted and he stumbled slightly.

They stared at each other.

"You look awful," he finally said.

"Thanks," she said acerbically.

"What happened?" he inquired.

“The Resistance doesn’t have any other healers with my specialty,” she said in a tired voice. She stared at him.

“You look rather awful too,” she said, looking him over carefully. It was an extreme understatement.

He glanced down at himself. His face was tense and gaunt, as though he’d lost a dramatic amount of weight. His features were twisted and drawn. His skin was grey and papery looking. He looked as though he hadn’t slept at all since Hermione had last seen him.

“You may have noticed the Dark Lord was rather upset about the attacks,” he said in a bland voice.

Hermione felt herself pale, and her chest hurt as though she’d been struck. She hadn’t even thought—she’d had the information and she’d run with it. She’d worried over the possibility of his betrayal, but she hadn’t even paused to think that the legitimacy meant Malfoy might pay for having given it to her.

“What happened?” she demanded, drawing her wand and coming toward him.

“It’s fine,” he said in a clipped voice.

“What did he do to you?”

“Fuck off, Granger,” Malfoy said, grimacing. His fingers spasmed slightly as he drew away from her.

Hermione ignored him and cast a diagnostic spell. He didn’t move.

The diagnostic indicated that he’d been extensively crucio’d. Probably right up to the limit, given that he was still showing the aftereffects weeks later. Or perhaps it had happened repeatedly. There was something else in the diagnostic. She cast a more obscure diagnostic spell to try to identify what it was.

“What—happened to your back?” she demanded finding it difficult to keep her voice steady as she tried to read the information her charm was revealing. It was a mangled blur of Dark Magic and poison; she wasn’t even sure how to interpret it.

Malfoy’s face tensed slightly.

“The cruciatus curse is such an excellent punishment for failure,” he said in a light tone, “but overusing it risks compromising the mind. Sometimes a different, permanent reminder is deemed additionally necessary.”

“Take off your shirt,” Hermione demanded. She needed to see what had been done or she wouldn’t be able to read the results of the diagnostic. The damage it indicated was an extensive combination injury, unlike anything she’d encountered before.

“Leave it be, Granger,” he said in a hard voice. “Your Order got just what it wanted.” He scoffed faintly. “I just hope it was worth it and you lot didn’t only drag out a lot of useless cripples.”

“Let me see,” she pressed. “Just let me see.”

“Don’t pretend to care,” he said coldly. “Are you really going to act surprised? You expect me to

believe you somehow didn't anticipate this? After all, weren't you hoping I'd die once you had everything you could get from me?"

The bitterness in his voice was so acrid Hermione could almost taste it. It twisted through the room and Hermione could feel his resentment. His loneliness.

"No. I—I'm sorry. I didn't—" She drew closer to him.

He'd been hurting for weeks because of the opportunity he'd given them. With his rank in Voldemort's army, the blame had surely fallen on him even if he weren't suspected of enabling it.

She hadn't even paused to realise it. Hadn't thanked him. He'd just—slipped from her mind. It hadn't occurred to her how extensively he might pay for it.

"I'm sorry," she said, reaching toward him, feeling faint with horror and guilt. "I got so caught up in work—I wasn't thinking."

She unclasped his cloak and gently lifted it off his shoulders. He flinched and stared up at the ceiling, looking resigned.

She slowly unbuttoned his robes and shirt and then, walking behind him, as lightly as she could, drew the clothing off his shoulders.

She gasped. There were dozens of runes carved into each of his shoulders. Deep. Straight down. Cut all the way into the bones.

The Dark Magic hanging over them was sickeningly palpable. Just standing near them Hermione felt her body break into a cold sweat.

Hermione had read of sorcerers who used dark runic rituals to bind their servants. The brutal ceremony had been outlawed for over a thousand years.

Malfoy had been conscious as the blood and magic was invoked in his flesh; as each line was sliced into him.

The cuts of each rune were still raw, as though they couldn't heal, even though they were clearly weeks old. It reminded her of werewolf injuries. The Dark Magic had become visibly septicemic.

She lifted her hand but refrained from touching him. "What did he do? Draco, how did he do this to you?"

"Goblin-wrought silver blade, infused with Nagini's venom. I'm told that they may eventually heal," he said in a wooden voice. "There's nothing you can do. Now that you've satisfied your curiosity, we should return to business."

He tried to turn to face her but Hermione stepped around him, casting several different obscure diagnostic charms and inspecting them. Her magic was stable again, although sleep deprivation made her head feel light and hollow.

There were black tendrils beneath his skin from the mixture of the venom and dark magic. She could see the poison in his veins, halfway down his back, up over his shoulders and around his ribs like a poisonous vine. Crawling into him and sinking into the core of his magic.

She summoned her satchel. “I’m so sorry. I—can’t heal this. But I think I can help contain it. Please let me try.”

Malfoy eyed her over his shoulder but didn’t try to step away from her again.

Hermione cast a complex spell and then, gently as she could, traced the tip of her wand slowly over one of the long black tendrils. Starting near his lowest rib she gradually forced the poison back toward the incisions and then siphoned the tiny thread out of the rune it had spread from. As she drew out the poison and contained it in a empty vial, she had to sever the connection between the thread and tissue with a sharp jerk.

Malfoy nearly dropped to his knees as he screamed. It was a nearly soundless, guttural rasp of someone intimately acquainted with torture.

“What are you doing?” he half snarled and half groaned. “Is this somehow not already a sufficient amount of pain for you?” Hermione laid a hand on his arm, trying to hold him steady. “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to hurt you. I have to pull out all the excess Dark Magic. It’s poison. If you let it stay, your body and magic will try to assimilate it. And—when you have dark magic in you at a cellular level like that—there’s no going back. It just starts eating you from the inside. Magic like that is why your Dark Lord looks the way he does. And—with the quantity of runes—you‘ll have a few years at most. Either your mind or your body, Dark Magic exacts a price.”

“I am aware of how Dark Magic works,” he hissed, his hands were balled into fists and he was shaking slightly.

“Then please, let me try to fix this.”

Draco dropped his head slightly and huffed faintly as though he were laughing. Hermione studied him for a moment. He didn’t say anything else.

She traced out two more threads. By the third Draco collapsed to his knees. He was deathly pale and his skin felt cold and clammy to touch.

She laid a hand as gently as she could on the front of his shoulder. She could feel the arch of his clavicle under her fingers, and see the mad, pained flutter of his pulse beneath his jaw.

“Do you want me to stun you?” she asked quietly. “I can do it faster than way. It won’t change the efficacy. But you have to trust me.”

Malfoy went still. Apparently considering.

“Go ahead,” he said after a minute. “You’re already more than capable of getting me killed any time you happen to feel like it.”

She braced him against herself, his head pressed against her diaphragm.

“ *Stupefy* ,” she said softly, and caught him as his dead weight slumped against her. With a practiced lightening charm she eased him gently to the ground and laid his head on his cloak.

Hermione worked quickly. She had done the spellwork once before when she’d been training in a hospital in Albania. It had been a single, self-inflicted rune on an aspiring dark wizard who hadn’t understood the Dark Magic he was trying to invoke until the poisoning nearly killed him.

With Malfoy unconscious, Hermione's guilt was able to strike her fully. She should have realised. She should have come back sooner to check on him. She was afraid she was too late. The runes were set. Deeply.

She traced out all the dark magic until she had eight vials full of the mix of the curse and poison. She'd have to incinerate them in a magical fire.

She carefully laid a containment enchantment around all the runes on each shoulder. It was a spell Severus had taught her; he'd used it to contain the curse on Dumbledore's hand. Given that the magic was in Malfoy's back she was doubtful that it would have any affect, but she tried nonetheless.

Malfoy's injuries were not intended to kill him immediately; rather, they were meant to hurt, and corrupt his magic. A gradual death sentence. Dark magic like runic blood rituals was deep and old.

She read the oath.

It wasn't a typical runic oath. Voldemort, in his vanity, hadn't utilised a traditional vow of loyalty and honesty. Rather it seemed tailored to the specific failure. The runes bound Malfoy to be unhesitating, cunning, unfailing, ruthless, and unyielding; driven to succeed.

Hermione wasn't sure how effective runic blood oaths were; but she suspected that Voldemort's overconfidence in the Dark Mark had spared Malfoy's life. If Malfoy had been forced to have an oath of loyalty and honesty carved into his bones, he would likely have been forced to admit his betrayal. Instead Voldemort had accidentally used ancient magic to fuel Malfoy's drive to do whatever he wanted.

The excess in cruelty was horrifying. It wasn't like a battlefield injury; quickly inflicted, but slow to be repaired. The ritual had surely taken hours while Draco was strapped down and kept conscious for it. The precision and uniformity of the cuts. The steady invocation of the Dark Arts. Time taken to wipe away the blood before making the next incision. Driving the tip of the blade all the way into the bones was unnecessary; it had been done solely for the additional pain. It was an oath of the flesh; there was nothing that required it be written into his bones. He'd also been crucio'd, either before or after the ritual was performed, possibly at both points.

She felt she might vomit just thinking about it.

Hermione pulled out her Essence of Dittany. She only had a few vials of it left.

She pulled out her murtlap tentacles and crushed them together with ten drops of Essence of Dittany into a salve which she gently pressed into the cuts of the runes. She couldn't heal the incisions but she could ease the pain and reduce the potency of the venom so that they would recover faster. Then she cast a protective ward over Malfoy's back to seal everything in without bandages.

She ran her fingers lightly over his arms, feeling the rigid knots in his muscles from the cruciatus. It appeared he had at least gotten some therapy for that.

Voldemort clearly did not want to damage Malfoy to the point of ruining him entirely, but he had had no qualms about torturing Draco all the way up to that exact line.

Malfoy was a weapon for Voldemort. The decision to carve runes into him made Draco more deadly. They sharpened his edge, but also made him a short-term tool. Heavy use of Dark Magic

was eroding over the course of many years. There was a reason dark wizards didn't tend to reach a hundred. They went mad, or deteriorated physically. With the quantity of Dark Magic that had been emanating from the runes before Hermione treated them, Malfoy would be lucky to live a decade; possibly only a few months before his mind began slipping. He already tended to arrive drenched in Dark Magic.

Hermione's hand wandered up to her neck, and she twisted the chain of her necklace between her fingers as she stared down at him.

She drew his left hand into hers. His long fingers dwarfed hers. There were the familiar callouses from flying and dueling on his palm and fingers.

She lightly massaged his hand. The fingers spasmed slightly at her touch, even though he should have been insensate. She tapped her wand tip across his hand at the various pressure points, sending mild vibrations into the drawn muscles to help release the tension.

When his fingers fell open, she began bending and rubbing and massaging them until they could fully open and close without twitching spasmodically. Spasms like that could be life or death in a duel, interfering with a wand motion or a person's aim.

As she worked she tilted her head to the side and studied his face. Unconscious, his features relaxed from the hard, closed expression he usually wore. He looked sad.

She felt so guilty it hurt. She also felt like an idiot. She should have realised. He could have been killed.

Unlike her, he had to have known he'd be punished for the attack he'd enabled. His hesitation —

He could have prepared. It could have been a trap. He knew exactly which prisons they had information about.

How had he phrased his advice?

" *The response to Order activity will be slightly delayed. If the Order has been waiting for an opening, it may be the edge they're looking for....if the Order were to attack multiple prisons simultaneously, the response will be—less cohesive."*

He'd given them their first massive victory in years. He'd handed it to them, and then paid for it. It was *his* response that was delayed and less cohesive.

Whatever it was he thought he could get by aiding the Order, he clearly wanted it more than anything.

She moved to the other side of his body and cast a gradual rennervation spell on him. It reduced the grogginess and likelihood of there being a headache when he regained consciousness.

While he was waking up, she began tapping her wand across his other hand and then massaging it. The instant he became conscious, she could feel the tension radiate across his body. He froze instantly. It had been, she suspected, a tremendous leap of faith for him to let her stun him. Trusting anyone did not come naturally to him. She kept coaxing his fingers into pliance as he turned his head. She could feel his eyes on her but she kept working and didn't look up. "There's no need," he said after a few minutes. "I have a session with a healer later today."

“If it’s the same one who has done nothing about your back, I would recommend feeding the idiot to a giant squid,” she said sharply.

He lifted his head and looked back at his shoulders with a pained grimace.

“What did you do?”

“After I siphoned out all the excess magic and venom, I laid a containment enchantment over the runes. I can’t reverse them, but hopefully it will keep the Dark Magic contained to the runes rather than sinking into your soul. I’ve packed them with murtlap and dittany to help ease the pain. I’m assuming you’re already taking pain relief potions.” He gave a faint nod. Hermione ran her fingers up and down his hand carefully, feeling the familiar wand calluses along his fingers, seeking out any trace of tremors, and muttering spells under her breath as she bent and massaged them. “Hopefully it will heal the incisions a little faster. There’s nothing I can do about the scars, or the ritual curse they contain. I’m sorry—I should have come back sooner. If I had—maybe we could have removed the bones and regrown them before it had settled in. Now, even if I replace them and flense you, the oath will re-emerge...”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, snatching his hand away from her abruptly and getting up. It had to be agonising to move but he didn’t make a sound. But he was paler and wavered slightly once he was standing. “As you mentioned, you were rather busy. It doesn’t appear that you were off at the seaside sunbathing and willfully neglecting your pet Death Eater. Healing me was never intended to be your job.”

He was apparently feeling a little better, given that his sarcasm had re-emerged.

“I should have come,” she repeated. “It needs to be monitored. And the salve, it should be changed daily for best effect—“

“Unfortunate.”

“I can come,” she said. “It will only take a few minutes. If you can spare the time morning or evening. I’ll come.”

He stared at her.

“Really? You have time for that?” he asked snidely.

“I’ll make time.”

He seemed to be considering something for several moments. “Fine. Eight o’clock in the evening. If you come I’ll show up. If you can’t, it’s no matter.” “I’ll be here.”

She helped slip his shirt up over his shoulders and buttoned it. She paused halfway up.

“I’m really sorry, Draco,” she said.

He stared down at her and quirked an eyebrow.

“If I’d known a bit of healing was going to make you so familiar with me, I never would have let you do it.” She looked up at him as she finished buttoning.

“Do you not want me to call you Draco? It just seems rather odd to still go by surnames after so

long. Assuming neither of us die in the war and you don't get tired of me, I'm guessing we're going to be around each other for a while."

He rolled his eyes doubtfully.

"Call me whatever you want, Granger. I'm not changing anything."

Typical.

She suspected that surnames were just another way to maintain distance. Which was why it had occurred to her that perhaps she should begin referring to him as Draco.

Subconscious distance affected behavior. If she wanted to get closer she had to move first, and she couldn't let her own subconscious attitudes hold her back.

"Any information this week?"

He gave a short nod, the corner of his mouth twitched faintly. "The new curse development division is going to be in Sussex. It's budgeted to be a considerably larger one. They're expanding the laboratories beyond curses. It's a research facility, using prisoners."

Hermione swallowed. "Of course."

"Hogwarts is being turned into a prison. It already has enough wards; it will replace all the prisons lost. They're purging it currently of any magic considered uncooperative."

Something inside Hermione wrenched at the news. When Hogwarts had been abandoned they had tried to take what they could, but the House-elves and portraits had been bound to the school; they left them behind. Her mouth twisted slightly.

"I'm sure the school will fight it," she said.

"Undoubtedly. The choice was made because the Dark Lord is hopeful the news will enrage Potter. And—it's intended as final insult to Dumbledore." Hermione's eyes flickered up to his face and then rapidly away as he said the Headmaster's name. She forced her expression not to change.

"I'll ensure Harry is braced for it and doesn't do anything foolish."

He gave a short nod.

"I'll see you tomorrow then," she said and looked him over again. "Take care—Draco. I'm so sorry."

The corner of his mouth twitched for a moment, then he pressed his mouth into a flat line and his expression tensed; bracing himself before he apparated away.

*Flashback 9*

**June 2002**

The next night, Hermione slipped out of Grimmauld Place after dinner, claiming the need for more milk from the market up the street.

When she arrived in the shack, she stood awkwardly, wondering if Draco would appear. She suspected that he wasn't expecting her to make it.

He arrived suddenly with a sharp crack, wincing.

She stared. In the past, he'd always been fully dressed; shirt, robes, and a cloak for good measure. While she'd stripped him to his waist twice, both occasions had been mostly professional and he'd redressed immediately afterward.

He was just wearing trousers and a button down shirt. All in black. The absence of layers emphasised how tall and lithe he was. He seemed like a panther; black, cool, and predatory.

Practically speaking, it was logical and efficient. Fewer layers to remove. Less weight pressing against his injured back. Yet it felt weirdly intimate.

He wandlessly summoned a chair, and straddled it backward while he began unbuttoning his shirt.

He hissed and gasped under his breath as he twisted his shoulders to pull it down.

"Is it hurting any less?" she said, hesitating slightly as she laid a hand on his arm. His skin was still unnaturally cold. Touching him sent a shiver of fear down her spine as he flinched faintly and his muscles rippled beneath her fingers.

"Slightly," he said, after a beat.

With a wave of her wand, she carefully drew out and banished the murtlap and dittany, and then administered a very gentle cleansing charm over all the cuts.

Draco jerked and dropped his head down against the back of the chair.

"Fuck, Granger!" he snarled, his knuckles white where he was gripping the chair.

"It's done now," she said after another moment. "I'm sorry. I had to. Wizarding folk may be immune to most infections but there's no knowing what else that knife had been used for. Or exactly what properties Nagini's venom has; it may neutralise your natural immunity."

"A bit of warning next time, please," he said, his voice shaking slightly. "Sorry. Most people prefer not to know. Bracing for it can make it worse."

"I'd prefer to know."

She stared at the runes. A cold sinking sensation came over her. The tendrils of dark Magic were

already beginning to creep out from the runes again. She had been too late. The runes would continue to poison him. She lay a hesitant hand on Draco's arm. "This—is going to hurt again. Do you—want me to stun you?"

He glanced back at her, and studied her face. Something in his eyes flashed for a moment, and his expression hardened.

"Is there really any point?" he said.

Hermione flinched and she dropped her eyes. "Let me try," she said quietly.

Draco stared at her for another minute before he snorted faintly and shook his head in disbelief as he looked away.

"Fine. One more try," he said in a resigned voice before resting his head on the back of the chair.

Hermione stunned him again.

It only took her a few minutes to remove all the traces of dark magic. Then she cast several diagnostic charms, trying to break down the layers of the ritual and find something she could deconstruct and nullify.

The ritual was set.

She was too late.

She traced her fingers over his back as she wondered what to do.

He had to know. She was almost certain he knew the runes were going to kill him eventually.

A gradual death sentence for his aid to the Order. Whatever he wanted by aiding them couldn't be a long term ambition. With the price he'd paid, she doubted he was planning to usurp Voldemort. If he did, it would be a short reign.

The Order needed him. The first Wizarding war had lasted eleven years. When she told Moody what had been done to Draco and said she had offered to heal him he told her to do what she could.

If Hermione couldn't find a way to stall the erosion, they would be extremely lucky to have Draco last that long. If he did, he'd barely be reliable at that point. Hermione reached up and ran a fingertip along the chain around her neck for several minutes before pulling the amulet out from under her shirt.

She stared at the sun-disk. Then she unclasped the chain and slid the amulet off. She pressed the tip of her wand against it and reversed the series of protective wards and charms it carried before placing it on the floor. She stomped sharply on the amulet and felt it break under her heel. When she removed her foot, a small white stone lay amid the crushed red glass and twisted metal.

She didn't touch it. With a flick of her wand she levitated the stone so that it hovered in the air. She could feel the magic emanating from it. It made the air hum. She reached over and pulled Draco back into her arms, trying not to put any pressure on the runes.

Then she floated the stone over and lowered it to the left side of his chest, against his bare skin.

It started glowing, brighter and brighter, until she had to squint. Then she watched as the light

slowly sank into his skin and faded away. Hermione stared, wondering if anything else would happen; if there would be any immediately noticeable effects. There wasn't an abundance of information about how to process worked.

She performed a diagnostic and inspected it, Draco was sleep deprived and living on a high dose of top quality pain relief; he had muscle damage from the cruciatus, and the runes were still an unintelligible, mangled concentration of wounds and poison and ritual curse. The diagnostic charm did not indicate anything else. Which was normal—she thought—that was how it was supposed to work.

After a minute, when nothing else occurred, she carefully leaned Draco forward in the chair again.

She reapplied the salve she'd made, pressing it in as lightly as she could before replacing the containment enchantment and all the protective spells.

Then she slipped the remnants of the amulet into her pocket and rennervated Draco.

He lifted his head sharply and stood. Hermione gently pulled his shirt back up over his shoulders. He stared down at her as she buttoned his shirt and then straightened the fabric before staring up at him. He had a tired expression on his face as he stared down at her.

She impulsively reached up and touched him on the cheek. She felt his jaw twitch faintly under her hand as she studied his expression. She thought his skin felt a little less cold.

His eyes glittered, and the corner of his mouth twitched, but he didn't pull her hand away.

"I have to go," she said, "I'll see you tomorrow night."

Draco didn't say anything as she left the shack and apparated away.

The next night, there was no poison or dark magic bleeding out from the runes. Hermione said nothing as she quietly removed the salve, cleansed the incisions, replaced the salve, and then carefully recast all the spells.

Draco was more silent each night. He'd tense and gasp slightly in pain as Hermione cleaned the wounds, but he rarely said anything unless Hermione asked him a question.

"Is it going to be suspicious—that someone is healing you?" she abruptly asked after several days.

Draco froze for a moment and then laughed faintly. "Did that just occur to you now?"

Hermione flushed. "It's not usually a concern."

He shook his head. "There are no orders restricting me from getting them treated. If you somehow manage it, it will hardly be the first time I've succeeded at something against improbable odds." His lip curled faintly. "So by all means, continue poking at them with your wand." Hermione continued without another word.

She discovered, to her faint offense, how rarely anyone paid attention to her comings and goings. She didn't even need to offer any excuses for leaving Grimmauld Place every night.

Harry, Ron and Ginny had gone to investigate a lead on horcruxes. Hermione had realised that several artifacts of the Hogwarts founders had gone missing during Voldemort's lifetime and so the

Order had assigned Harry to try hunting them. Hermione suspected that Kingsley and Moody had very little hope that Harry would find anything; she thought it was likely just a way to keep Harry from insisting upon fighting in every single skirmish.

With the intelligence Draco provided, Moody and Kingsley had begun approving more risky and ambitious attacks. The decisions were partly because of the opportunities that Draco had afforded the Order, but primarily because the situation was dire enough that Order had to either begin taking risks with long odds or conceding that they couldn't win the war.

Despite the success of the Order's attack, it had also set them back severely.

They had hundred of new fighters to feed and house, and at the same time their resources in Europe were steadily drying up as Voldemort's hold grew stronger. The French Resistance had all but vanished. They had received word that Hagrid and Olympe Maxime had been captured and executed shortly after the prison attack. All of Eastern Europe was firmly under Death Eater control, while the Northern European countries were so occupied with keeping Voldemort's encroaching forces at bay that they had little support they could offer.

The Order was running out of money. Running out of resources. Trying to feed an army with personal vaults and secret donations. It was difficult for Resistance fighters to hold jobs in the muggle world.

Hermione had nearly drained her own bank account personally paying for potion supplies as the Order was forced to repeatedly slash her budget even while the need for the healing potions increased sharply.

They weren't starving yet. But Hermione was beginning to grow suspicious about how Kingsley was accomplishing such a thing.

Sometimes she doubted that defeating Voldemort would even be enough. If he died, with the control the Death Eaters currently had, there was a good chance someone would just step in to replace him.

Her mind always went immediately to Malfoy when that thought occurred.

She had yet to really see a demonstration of his abilities, but based on everything the Order knew of him, he was considered one of the likely candidates to take over in the event of Voldemort's demise.

Moody and Kingsley were almost certain that it was Draco's true motive in spying for the Order. According to Severus, the Dark Mark had several elements to it. It allowed Voldemort to summon his followers to him, wherever they might be. It also enabled him to locate his followers; they couldn't run. And finally, the Dark Mark prevented bearers from attacking their master. Even if Malfoy thought he had the ability to kill Voldemort, he couldn't wield magic against him, not lethally. Draco would need someone else cast the death blow.

Hermione sometimes thought that becoming the next Dark Lord was indeed Draco's motive, but—after the runes, she questioned that conclusion. There was something angrier and more embittered in him than ambition. The deadliness and cold rage felt more like desperation than pride.

When she had told Moody that Draco had not demanded an Unbreakable Vow from her, the glint in Moody's eye made her begin to suspect that he intended to use her to kill Draco at some point.

She tried not to think about it. She couldn't think about killing him.

She couldn’t stand behind him night after night, trying to heal the runes carved into him and think about murdering him when he stopped being useful. Such coldness exceeded even her capacity for strategy.

Her fingers trembled slightly as she recast the protective charms over the cuts. She’d tried using bandages but the venom reacted.

“Alright. You’re done,” she said quietly as she pulled his shirt up over his shoulders lightly.

When she left, she didn’t apparate immediately back to Grimmauld Place. Instead she walked down the lane and into Whitecroft.

Draco’s injury was eating into her detachment. It was causing her to go off mission.

Death Eater. Murderer. Spy. Target. Tool.

She repeated the list to herself again and again. But her conviction and resolve sounded hollow.

She found a creek, and watched the moving water glitter in the moonlight as she tried to force herself to detach. She shoved her hands into her pockets, and then hissed and jerked her right hand out. She found her index finger bleeding slightly. A piece of her amulet had broken the skin. She’d forgotten about it.

She pulled the rest of the shards from her pocket and tossed them into the creek, before healing the scratch.

He killed Dumbledore, she reminded herself. He was probably just trying to become the next Dark Lord.

Death Eater. Murderer. Spy. Target. Tool. But then she’d think of his accusation: that she knew what would happen to him. That she was only pretending to care that he was hurt. That she was probably hoping he’d die once he wasn’t useful anymore. The bitterness and resignation in his tone haunted her.

Perhaps he expected her to betray him someday.

The thought made something inside of Hermione shred somewhat, as though it were mangling her internal organs.

Why hadn’t he made her take a Vow?

What did he want? The mystery around him dragged her mind toward him. Obsessing over every detail. Trying to comprehend what drove all the inconsistencies of his behavior.

The push and pull he exerted over their relationship felt like a tide. His arrogance and loneliness. He disliked her, despite whatever “fascination” which had prompted him to demand her. He often seemed to *wish* he could have nothing to do with her.

But he was so isolated. He couldn’t bring himself to push her fully away when she gave him opportunities to give in.

It was as Severus had said. She had been a miscalculation on his part. Even though he appeared to suspect her manipulation, her draw was inevitable and apparently irresistible.

Draco wasn't the only one falling into an obvious trap.

She knew he was using her. Using the Order. She knew that he was manipulative, cruel, dangerous, and responsible for the deaths of countless people. But as she tried to unravel him, he grew increasingly tragic and terrifyingly human.

She pressed her hands over her eyes and took a deep breath as she tried to clear her sympathy away.

She felt that if she could just know what his motive truly was, she'd be able to sever the sympathy; root it out from wherever it had started growing inside of her.

She didn't feel guilty for manipulating him but she wasn't sure that she had the resolve to be able to eventually kill him.

Sometimes she wondered bitterly if Moody and Kingsley regarded her as having any limits. Make her a whore, then make her a murderer. Did they just assume she'd want to?

It felt sometimes as though they were walking her down to Hell and watching as she passed through the gates. She wondered how pleased they were to have a tool who would suffer in whatever way they needed her to.

Moody was her handler. He handled her. Whatever trace of hesitation he'd had when he first asked her to give herself to Malfoy, he'd moved beyond. She was useful. An excellent pawn for the Order. The key to the piece they really wanted. Malfoy.

Compared to Draco's value, Hermione was an acceptable loss.

If Harry and Voldemort were the Kings on each side of the board, then Malfoy was Voldemort's Queen. Gaining him was worth sacrificing almost every other piece on board. He was unrestricted and deadly. Crucial.

It made sense. Strategically, she saw the logic. She understood the necessity.

But on a personal level, it hurt so deeply she could barely breathe.

She hated herself.

She hated Moody. She hated Kingsley.

They'd take, and they'd take, and she'd be left with nothing but ashes when the war ended.

But they weren't really taking. She was offering. It wasn't as though they were requiring anything of her that she wasn't willing to do.

For Harry and Ron, she reminded herself. It will be worth it.

But something inside of her felt as though the war was corrupting her. She was twisting. Reshaping herself into a creature that felt like everything she hated.

Darkness gets into your soul, that was what Harry always said.

Never mind how irredeemable she thought Draco was for killing Dumbledore. If she sold Draco out at some future point, she imagined she'd belong in a far lower level of hell than even he did. But she'd still do it.

Minerva had been right. Hermione was fully willing to damn herself if it meant winning the war.

She slipped down the bank of the creek, gathered up several stones, and began building them into a stack.

Her mother had travelled a great deal before marriage, and had told Hermione how in Korea the people would pile rocks up, each one representing wishes and prayers.

Mothers would build large towers of prayers for their children.

Hermione had built stacks in her backyard as a child, praying many prayers for friends. Heartfelt prayers that had lain unanswered for years until she reached Hogwarts.

Hermione laid down large foundation stones for Harry and Ron.

*Let them live,* she prayed. *Let them survive this war. Please don't let me lose them.* Then she placed a stone for Ginny. Fred. George. Charlie. Bill. Molly and Arthur.

Percy had died during the Ministry takeover.

*Let them live,* she murmured.

She added stones for Remus and Tonks, Neville, Poppy and Severus and Minerva and the Caithness orphans. She was afraid she'd be too selfish if she included everyone in the Order and the Resistance. The stack was somewhat unstable.

She picked up one last stone and hesitated.

If the pile fell the wishes wouldn't come true.

She stared down at the final stone in her hands, brushing her fingers across it slightly. It was cold but the bite slowly faded as she kept hesitating, turning it over and over in her hands. Holding it out, then drawing it back and holding it longer.

Maybe she shouldn't place it.

Maybe it was selfish.

She almost put it back into the creek.

Then she bit her lip and placed it.

*If there's any way, don't make me responsible for Draco's death,* she prayed.

The stack wobbled but didn't fall. She let out a sharp sigh of relief and nearly cried.

She washed her hands off in the creek and then stared at the tower she had built.

It was a silly, superstitious ritual. It didn't mean anything.

But she'd given nearly everything for the war, and it had yet to be enough. Superstition felt like all she had left.

She cast a spell to repel muggles around the stones and apparated away. She kept healing Draco, night after night. The venom combined with the runic magic made the injury one of the cruelest she

had ever encountered. No matter what she did, it stayed fresh. He should have been in a hospital or on bed rest, not apparating and spying and whatever it was Voldemort had him doing.

She scoured old healing textbooks, and stayed up late into the night brewing potions she hoped would help heal or at least ease the pain further, but nothing she tried worked. Nagini's venom was essentially a neutralising agent against any type of healing, Magical or nonmagical.

It should have eventually worn off. When Arthur had been bitten by Nagini in the ministry, the venom had faded after a few days of blood replenishing potion. But runic magic interacted with the venom, and kept the venom isolated in the incisions. Hermione couldn't simply flush it from Draco's system. Packing the cuts with Essence of Dittany and Murtlap and keeping infection at bay was all Hermione could do until the venom wore off on its own.

Draco finally spoke to her first after several weeks.

"Be careful foraging," he said abruptly as she was pulling his shirt up over his shoulders.

She paused.

"I have been. I send detection spells out every time I apparate somewhere to make sure there are no anti-apparition wards nearby. And all my clothing is shielded."

"The Dark Lord wants the Order crushed within the year. He is growing confident about his hold in the rest of Europe. He's concentrating his troops and bringing in new resources."

Hermione felt herself grow cold.

"In related news," he added, "I've just been given a manticore. I haven't the faintest idea what I'm expected to do with it."

The casual way in which he announced it made it seem like he had been given an unwanted spaniel and not one of the most deadly, semi-sentient dark creatures in the wizarding world.

"You were given a manticore?" she repeated. She had to force the words out, her chest felt as though it were being constricted.

"It's only half-grown, I'm told. McNair informed me that it has been dropped at my manor," he said with an aggravated expression as he pulled his shirt closed.

"Are you allowed to kill it?" she said, watching his pale skin vanish beneath the black fabric.

"Well—I doubt that is what was intended, but it didn't come with instructions."

"Manticore blood is impervious to most magic. You could probably craft some very useful weapons with it."

He turned to look down at her. "Such as?"

Hermione hesitated, and then reached forward to finish buttoning his shirt and straightening the collar. They were standing so close their bodies were almost touching. She could smell the cedar in his clothes, and she cautiously rested a hand on his chest over his heart, feeling his heartbeat under her fingers. She bit her lip for a moment before looking up at him. His mouth was quirked in faint amusement as he stared down at her, his eyes darkened as she stared up at him.

“I’ve read that goblin wrought knives or arrowheads infused with manticore venom could cut through shield charms,” she said slowly. “Clothing soaked in the blood would be impervious to almost all magic. Like shielded clothing, but the magic wouldn’t ever wear off.” Draco’s eyes narrowed “So what?” he asked, watching her carefully. “You think I should kill my gift from the Dark Lord and then use it to make enchanted objects for the Order?”

“No,” she said, sliding her hand away and looking down. “Even if you wanted to, I wouldn’t be able to provide any explanation for obtaining them. And most members wouldn’t use them anyway. Manticores are dark creatures after all.” Her tone was bitter at the last words. She drew a sharp breath. “Most of the fighters in the Resistance would get killed if they ran into a manticore on a battlefield. There’s probably only a hundred who would even know how to, and are capable of, killing one. So—if you could invent an excuse for disposing of it before your master decides to unleash it, it would be preferable.”

She edged even closer and touched the back of his hand nervously.

She would beg, she would do anything to convince him.

He drew his hand sharply away from her touch, and for a moment she braced herself for his irritation. But then he caught her chin and tilted her head back until her eyes met his. He studied her expression for a moment as she stared back at him.

He leaned toward her until she thought he was going to kiss her. “You are always so pragmatic.” She felt the words brush against her lips.

Then he released her chin abruptly and stepped away. His eyes were glinting as he noted her confusion.

“Don’t die, Granger. I might miss you,” Draco said, smirking, before he vanished with a crack.

*Flashback 10*

**July 2002**

Hermione felt paranoid the following Tuesday when she was foraging, but the journey passed again without incident. That morning, when she arrived at the shack, Draco was already there waiting.

“So, dueling,” he said, spinning his wand in his right hand as she walked through the door.

Hermione froze and blanched slightly.

She had braced herself—reminded herself repeatedly that Draco would likely do something incredibly nasty to her as soon as he started feeling better. It was apparently his default method for maintaining distance between them.

She’d healed him considerably more from his punishment than she had after his fight with a werewolf. If he regarded her as overstepping recently in the way she had been touching him —if the space between them really had narrowed—she had reminded herself that eventually he might do something horribly cruel to widen it again.

She’d known—

But walking into it still felt like being gutted.

She dropped her eyes, and forced her expression not to change.

“Right,” she said. She dropped her bag by the door and warded it.

His expression was cool and calculating as he stared at her from across the room.

“I want to see if your dodging and evading has improved, but I don’t want to rennervate you every minute—”

Hermione flinched faintly.

“Just don’t hit my hands,” she interrupted him, “I can’t work—if you hit my hands again.”

His eyes narrowed with annoyance.

“Fuck off, Granger, I’m not intending to hex you,” he snapped. He flicked his wand sharply toward her and she felt—liquid.

She glanced down and found a large water droplet spattered across the back of her hand.

“I realize you consider me a total monster,” he said flatly, “but I do make a general habit of keeping my word. I presume water will not offend you.” Hermione was still staring down at her hand in astonishment. Finally she looked up at him and blushed.

“Sorry,” she mumbled.

“Right.” His expression was stiff. “So—I’m primarily interested in seeing how you move. However, do try to land a hex on me, if you possibly can.” He entered a very uncommitted dueling stance, and waited for her to do the same.

She did, and then bobbed her head slightly in a bow before she sent a jelly-leg jinx toward him. He blocked it with the faintest flick of his right hand.

He sent a dozen drops of water in her direction and she easily blocked them with a nonverbal shield.

She sent a series of stunners and he blocked them without moving.

“Why are you so concerned with how I move when you never do?” she inquired as she sent several leg lockers and jelly leg jinxes toward his feet.

“I’m not dueling,” he said, shooting her a thin smile as he blocked her spells and caught her feet with several drops of water. “Your shield isn’t comprehensive. Stop maintaining it and dodge, or make sure it’s full-body.”

She flushed and physically dodged the next twenty water droplets while shooting several mild hexes in his direction.

“You aren’t even trying to hit me,” he said, frowning. “You do realise I basically duel for a living. I fight werewolves, your Order, Death Eaters… Especially lately, everyone in the Dark Lord’s ranks thinks that my injury is an open invitation to try to steal my spot.”

Hermione nearly tripped and stared at him in horror.

“What?” she said with a horrified gasp. If he were Harry or Ron she’d be smacking him upside the head.

He shot her squarely between the eyes with a drop of water.

“Focus!” he barked, before laying his hand across his brow in apparent despair but still blocking the leg locking jinx she shot. “You’re hopeless. Merlin. This is why you lot are losing.”

“I’m a healer,” she snapped defensively. “If you wanted me to try harder at hexing you, you should have talked about how you enjoy killing kneazles kittens.”

“Every night before I go to sleep,” he deadpanned as he filled the air with shooting drops of water. The floor was growing littered with puddles. “Are you really saying that you’ve been *dueling* ?” Hermione demanded. She stopped trying to jinx him and was simply staring at him in outrage while she knocked aside all the water he was sending toward her.

Draco rolled his eyes.

“You may recall, I’m a Death Eater,” he said. “I am at a loss as to how this surprises you.”

“You are injured! I assumed there were some basic tenets of human decency even among Death Eaters.” She was seething.

“Well, you’d be wrong. Despite its Muggle origins, the Dark Lord is a firm believer in promoting the survival of the fittest. Hence his aspiration to subjugate all Muggles. If my—chastisement—leaves me vulnerable to overthrow then I ostensibly deserve it.”

“So—what? They just get to attack you whenever they want to?” she asked angrily, continuing to ward off the rainstorm he was directing at her. The entire floor was covered in water. “Of course not,” he said, his lips curling condescendingly, “constant infighting weakens military cohesion. There’s a designated time each week before the Dark Lord, at which point challenges are permitted. And there are generally restrictions on killing, or doing anything to permanently impair our—usefulness.”

“That is vile.”

“The civilized man is a more experienced and wiser savage,” Draco said.

Hermione squinted at him in confusion.

“How is it that you know Darwin and Thoreau?”

“Oh, you know. ‘Know thyself. Know thy enemy. And you shall win a hundred battles without loss,’” he said with faint smirk. “We savage Death Eaters do know how to read. The Dark Lord doesn’t care what I do so long as I continue providing him victories.”

He sighed abruptly and stopped shooting water at her.

“You’re really not even going to try to hex me, are you?” he asked in irritation, as he banished the pool of water they were both standing in.

Hermione flushed faintly.

“I’ve spent a lot of time trying to heal you. I don’t want to make you fall,” she admitted begrudgingly.

“You fucking moron,” he said, glaring at her. “Do you expect Death Eaters to extend the same courtesy to you? If you’re injured on the ground, cursing you additionally would be funny.” “I think it’s generally understood that I would be a pretty piss-poor Death Eater,” she snapped.

“Obviously. But I would hope you could be pragmatic enough to duel competently.”

“I can be pragmatic. When it comes down to the line, I don’t baulk. But—I can’t try to injure you right now.”

She bit her lip and looked away from him.

“You—“ she started, “you’ve saved several hundred people now. There’s a chance no one will ever know. And you were punished for it. So—I’m not going to try to hurt you. Not when you’re already injured.”

She stood there awkwardly. He sighed and stared at her. There was cold calculation to his expression as he stood considering her. Then a long silence.

“Did you know,” Draco said in an airy tone after a minute, “that I was there when the Creevey family was dragged out of hiding?”

Hermione couldn’t have been more stunned if he’d just stepped up and backhanded her. She looked up at him sharply while he continued.

“Two Muggle-born wizards from the same family. Quite an anomaly. They were considered high

priority. The Dark Lord wanted their deaths spectacular." "You—," Hermione choked. The words died in her throat, swallowed by her rising horror.

"You should have heard how the Muggles screamed. Dear Aunt Bella had such a fondness for the cruciatus. You recall how she drove the Longbottoms insane? She considered the Creeveys her encore performance. The boys tried to bolt. Good little runners. Smart enough to know they couldn't save their parents."

Hermione felt as though she'd been punched. Repeatedly. She tried to breathe, but her lungs wouldn't function. Her throat felt as though something were closing around it.

Draco continued in a relentless voice, "Of course your Order came eventually, but they were rather late. The father bit through his tongue and drowned in the blood. Bella cut out the mother's womb, just in case the woman was still sane enough to understand what she was being punished for. While they were stringing her organs up around the parlor, I was set to track down the boys. It was easy, since they were blubbering and trying to stay together. Putting them in the countryside miles from another farm was quite an oversight for two wizards who couldn't apparate. Then the littler one stepped in a badger hole and broke his leg. He started crawling through the grass. An easy target for a killing curse. The second person I cursed in the back with it."

Hermione's wrist snapped forward without thinking as she shot a slicing hex at him. It grazed Malfoy's cheek. He didn't flinch as the blood welled up from the razor fine cut and streamed down his face. He stepped toward her. "You know…" he said softly, "the killing curse. It takes something out of you. It's not something just anyone can throw around. Not repeatedly. Colin could have kept running. If he had, he might still be alive today. But he stopped. For his dead brother he stopped, ran back, tried to drag the body with him."

"Did you—," Hermione croaked, feeling as though she might die from the horror currently welling up inside her. "Are you—"

Malfoy arched an eyebrow and smirked coldly down at her.

"Are you wanting to know if I'm the one responsible for that nightmare in your head?"

Hermione felt that if she opened her mouth again, she might vomit. Her wand was shaking in her fingers, and she felt torn between a desire to scream and sob. She had never felt capable of crucio'ing someone, but as Malfoy closed in on her, his grey eyes glinting, she was sure she'd mean it.

"No," he said softly, and Hermione started slightly. "That was Dolohov. He'd just invented it. He came specifically with the hope of testing it that day. But it's difficult to aim. Useless long range. You have to be within a foot of the target. If Colin had just run—he wouldn't have been hit with it."

Hermione clamped her hands over her mouth and dropped to the floor with a muffled sob.

Malfoy knelt down, forced her chin up, and stared coldly into her eyes.

"That is what Gryffindor sentiment looks like. All those noble ideals of not leaving people behind, not even the dead; of not using the Dark Arts; of not hitting someone because they're already down; of trying to ascribe heroism to people—when you feel like believing in any of that, remember just *how* and *why* Colin died in front of you. You have no idea how many of your Resistance fighters

I've killed because they believed the lie that goodness is an advantage in war." He let go of her face and stood.

"If you don't learn to fight now, you will die. The fact you haven't already been killed foraging is from the sheer benevolence of Fate. I'm sure you are too pragmatic to continue relying on such a thing. If you have any sense whatsoever, I'll expect some true resolve from you next week."

He dropped a roll of parchment beside her and apparated away.

Hermione sat shaking on the damp floor of the shack for a long time.

No one talked about Colin.

Out of a combined consideration for both Hermione and Harry, the topic was assiduously avoided. Anything that even vaguely broached it was treated with utmost delicacy. After it had happened, Hermione had hidden the memory in the recesses of her mind and it had festered like a wound. Malfoy had come across it while teaching her occlumency.

Having him drag it out and use the trauma to berate her was such a staggering blow she felt as though she were going into physical shock from it.

There were very few things that still felt sacred to Hermione.

Not her body.

Not her soul.

But Colin's death—it had always been such a private agony. It had driven her from her friends. It had taken her across Europe and back. It had driven her all the way into the shack in which she sat. All the way to Malfoy, who had used it to belittle the last pieces of herself that still remained.

She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes until they ached. Trying to recentre herself.

She was late for her shift in the hospital wing when she finally dragged herself from the floor and headed to Grimmauld Place.

She felt as though she were floating through the day. Weirdly detached. As though there were glass between her mind and the rest of the world.

Hermione went through the motions of healing and then a long evening of brewing.

The Order needed large batch of Draught of Living Death. It was their method for dealing with prisoners. They wouldn't kill them, and had neither prisons nor enough people to be able to spare some as guards. So Death Eaters they caught were kept in an unplottable location in suspended animation. Bill Weasley and his wife Fleur were in charge of it, using their skills as former Curse Breakers to weave elaborate enchantments and wards in order to accommodate the considerable number of prisoners the Order had accrued over the years.

As she sat waiting two and a half minutes for the potion to settle, she glanced at her watch. It was almost eight o'clock.

She sighed and buried her face in her hands. She did not want to see Malfoy again. If she did, she would probably punch him in his cruel face.

He probably wasn't expecting her to show up anyway. Her wand chimed to indicate that the time had passed, and she dropped the last bit of Valerian root in.

The potion turned pale pink.

She warded it, and put it carefully aside. She picked up her jar of salve and rolled it about in her hands. She was almost out of Essence of Dittany. She'd used most of it treating his runes. She tried not to calculate how many other injuries she could have healed with it if she weren't using it on Draco; tried not to quantify his value against the lives of others. How many he'd saved, how many he'd killed, how many lives his intelligence was or was not worth.

He'd killed Dumbledore. The number of deaths he was responsible for because of that act alone was sufficient to damn him. He'd never rebalance the scales, no matter how many people he saved.

Unless he helped them win. If they won, it might be enough.

She smiled bitterly to herself.

Draco Malfoy was exactly the same person he had been the night before. The only difference was that her knowledge of him had broadened slightly.

She couldn't understand him.

Why get so angry and monstrous because she didn't want to hurt him when he was already severely injured? He was so unreasonably angry and bitter. It felt as though she'd shattered the fragile peace between them.

But provoking her with Colin's death was low, even by her standards for him.

Maybe he was actually concerned that she was going to die.

She scoffed to herself. If he were, it was probably only because he didn't want to risk having a non-occlumens as his contact.

Before she could think more, she slipped the salve into her pocket and then headed to the shack. She was four minutes early.

Being there again felt exhausting.

She sat down on a chair and pulled a picture from her pocket. It was of herself, Ron, and Harry in the Great Hall, all mid-bite and looking up, faintly annoyed over being photographed. Colin had taken it.

She always stared at it when she felt depressed.

She put it back in her pocket and then leaned across the table and buried her head in her arms.

Maybe she would dose herself with Dreamless Sleep potion when she got back. She could feel the nightmares in the back on her mind. Just waiting for an opportunity to claw their way to the surface of her consciousness.

She'd already taken the potion eight times that month. She was still having nightmares from all the victims from the curse development division that were brought to her. She'd tried. She'd tried so hard to save them. There had been nothing she could do. Almost every single one had died. Those

that didn't, she euthanised; to spare them the endless agony they'd been magically trapped within.

If she took Dreamless Sleep Draught, it would be breaking the rules she held everyone else to. Barring injury, no one was permitted more than eight vials a month.

Not that anyone would know. Hermione was the one in charge of regulating the potions. The Resistance was too overdrawn to afford the redundancy of having a supervisor over her. Even if they tried to, unless the person also had a Potion Mastery, there was little chance they could stop Hermione from slyly doing whatever she pleased.

But it was a slippery slope to abuse the rules. Nine times a month. It would be so easy to rationalise ten after that. Then eleven.

Until it stopped working.

Until she wanted something stronger.

Severus had warned her. The number of ways a Potion Master could abuse their skills were endless.

Maybe when she got home she'd go get high with Neville, or see if Charlie would share his firewhiskey supply.

But she didn't really want to get high. And she wasn't allowed to be, even if she did want to. She was always on call in case of a healing emergency.

She could get drunk. She always kept sobriety potion carefully stocked in her stores. But she hardly got along with Charlie when she was sober.

Hermione felt desperate for someone to talk to.

Almost every interaction with Malfoy felt like an emotional punch in the gut, and she had to walk away from them and pretend they'd never happened.

She lived in a house crammed with people and she felt utterly isolated.

There was faint crack of apparition. She looked up dully to find that Malfoy had arrived. Cold and indolent-looking as always.

She wanted to cry and bolt. Or to hex him nastily and just leave him there.

She swallowed it and stood up.

He unbuttoned his shirt and straddled a chair. She didn't say a word as she pulled the fabric off his shoulders and set to work. "I'm going to use the cleansing charm now," she said in a mechanical voice. She counted to three and then cast it.

Then she swiftly reapplied the salve. The dittany had made progress in neutralising the poison. The cuts appeared almost ready to begin healing. She would probably be able to start closing them within the next week. The process would take several hours to do properly and ensure the scar tissue wasn't taut and wouldn't pull when he moved his shoulders.

She didn't want to talk to him but she forced herself to open her mouth. "If you have time in the next four to seven days, I can close the incisions. It will probably take three hours. After eight pm and before five am are the best times for me. I have hospital shifts and other duties during the day."

He didn’t say anything.

She recast the protective spells and dropped his shirt over his shoulders. Then she turned and walked out of the shack without a word.

The summer evening was cool. She shivered slightly and walked down the lane. She had decided. She was going to go get well and truly smashed.

She stopped outside a pub and hesitated. She was a talkative drunk. She couldn’t go into a muggle pub and start crying about everyone who had died. Even if she managed to pass herself off as a doctor in a casualty ward, she was a terrible conversational liar.

She continued until she found a market and bought herself a bottle of port. Her parents had always liked to drink port in the evenings when on holiday.

She carried it to the creek where her prayer tower stood, and then stared in surprise. There were reeds growing along the banks that she didn’t remember being there before, and the area felt slightly warmer. Magical. She cast several more muggle repelling spells and a privacy charm over the area and then opened the bottle and started drinking.

She remembered someone telling her that a person could get drunk faster using a straw. She didn’t know if it was true, but she conjured a long one and started sipping. She calculated that she had several hours before anyone would think to look for her. More than enough time to get drunk, cry under a bridge, and then sober slightly before heading back.

She hadn’t had any dinner; the alcohol hit her rapidly.

She was curled up in a ball among the reeds and was sobbing in short order.

She hated Malfoy. How dare he demand her, and isolate her, and talk about the Creevey family. She hoped she *was* the one who killed him.

She stood up and pulled the topmost stone off her tower, and tossed it back into the creek.

She did it too carelessly. The whole tower wobbled slightly and then fell crashing into the water. She gasped with horror and tried to rebuild it. Rock stacking required more finesse and steadier hands than she currently possessed. After several tries she gave up, sat down in middle of the creek and cried and shivered.

She hadn’t felt so pathetic in a long time and she didn’t even care. She should have bought two bottles of port.

“The fuck are you doing, Granger?”

*Flashback 11*

**July 2002**

Hermione looked up sharply and found Malfoy staring down at her from the road. She was too tired and angry to even feel embarrassed about being found drunk and crying in a creek.

“Bugger off, Malfoy,” she said, smacking at the water with her hand so that it sprayed in his direction.

“Are you drunk?” he asked.

“No, you tosser, I am sitting in a creek entirely sober,” she said with an eye-roll. “Go away. I don’t want to talk to you. I don’t want to see your nasty face. If I could obliviate your existence from my mind without risking the Order, I’d do it in a heartbeat.”

She started crying again.

“Fucking hell,” he said, staring down at her with the same expression of irritation he’d had when he told her about the unwanted manticore he found himself in possession of.

“Granger, you cannot sit crying in a creek,” he finally said.

“I actually can,” she retorted. “Aside from you, there’s no one to see. I already warded the area. None of the Muggles will come around or notice me. I have planned my emotional breakdown carefully and you are ruining it. So—bugger. Off.”

Her head felt very heavy, and she dropped it down onto her knees. It was growing very cold in the creek, but she was determined not to move until Malfoy went away.

There was a muffled thud, and then a hard grip suddenly closed around her arm, and she found herself being dragged up out of the water.

“Let go!”

She smacked Malfoy across the arm and kicked him in the shins as she attempted to wrench herself free.

“Leave me alone. You and Voldemort have ruined my life. Am I not even allowed to occasionally feel sad about it?”

“Granger, you idiot!”

Malfoy dragged her into his arms and apparated. They reappeared in the shack. She stared around the room dazedly, clinging to him for balance.

“Why are we here?” she demanded, her voice wobbling as she stepped away and tried to draw herself up. “I hate this place. One of the richest wizarding families in all of Europe, and you make

me come see you in this miserable house. As though I'm not already well-aware of the disdain you have for all of us Mudbloods. God, why didn't you just buy a whore house or a salt mine and make me visit you there?" "I told you there was a taboo and you used the Dark Lord's name," Malfoy snarled. "That is why you cannot get drunk in a fucking creek regardless of how many damn Muggle repelling charms you cast."

Hermione blinked and stared at him.

"I hate you," she finally said.

"The feeling is decidedly mutual," he said, looking at her with an expression of disdain.

She dropped into a heap on the floor.

"I hate you so much," she said. "I was already all alone—and then you demanded me and made it even worse. At least before—if anyone cared enough to ask me if I was alright I could tell the truth. But now—I can't even do that. And now—even if we win I won't have anything to look forward to. Everyone else will be free and I'll still be owned by you. I'm just going to be alone forever—"

She buried her face in her hands and cried afresh.

"Harry and Ron are never going to forgive me," she said, and her whole body shook with the force of her sobs. "Even if this wins the war—they'll never forgive me."

Her crying subsided slightly after several minutes.

"I'm really not clear on why you expect me to care." Malfoy stared down at her with an indifferent expression.

She glared up at him. "You brought me here knowing that I was drunk. If you didn't want to hear about it, you could have just left me alone the way I repeatedly told you to. I don't see why you won't just fuck off."

He arched an eyebrow.

"Hexing and swearing at me all in one day. It would seem I finally got to you. I wondered what it would take to make you give up your sweet caresses and tell me how you really felt." His expression was taunting.

"Shut up!" she snarled before dropping her head onto her knees and hugging herself.

"But really—we're just scratching the surface, aren't we? Perhaps I should list everyone I've killed," he said, stepping slowly around her with a malicious smile. "There were several Muggles first, practice runs before I went back to school. Aunt Bella said it was necessary to be used to killing before doing it to someone I actually knew. Then Dumbledore. And more Muggles. Did you know I was even assigned to find your parents? You must have hidden them yourself because there wasn't even a trace to be found. No sloppy details or secret goodbyes like many of those other Muggle-born families. Although, that ignorance still didn't spare your neighbors. Bella was crushed by how thorough you were."

Hermione was staring at him in horror.

"Then the Creeveys. And the Finch-Fletchleys. And my Aunt Andromeda and her husband Ted.

That one was rather personal for Bella, having a Muggle-born marry into the Black family was such a stain. It remained her sincerest regret that she never got to kill Nymphadora, especially after word got around that she'd gone and married a werewolf. Then after that—well, the dead tend to bleed together after a while but I believe it was more Muggles..."

Hermione could feel the warm fuzziness of her intoxication draining away from her as Malfoy kept talking. Listing name after familiar name. The glint of his silver eyes and the cold set expression on his face as he continued in his disdainful drawling voice.

"You know, Malfoy," she said quietly after a minute, "you spend so much time making sure I have just an excess of good reasons to hate you. It's odd."

He paused, and she stared up at him.

"It's not how humans work," she said. "Our brains are wired to rationalise things, so that the guilt doesn't eat us. We excuse. We blame. We find some explanation for ourselves that helps us sleep. People don't think of themselves as villains. They're killing to protect themselves, or their families, or their money, or their way of life. Even your master, he doesn't think he's a villain. He just thinks he's better than everyone else. He thinks he deserves to rule over everything. When he tortures and kills Muggles—it's alright because they're not really people. When he carved runes into your back for hours—it was alright, you deserved it because you failed him. In his mind he isn't a villain, he's a god. But you—you do think you're a villain. You think you deserve to be hated." She cocked her head to the side as she studied him. "I often wonder why that is."

Malfoy's face had grown colder and more closed as she was speaking.

"I'll save you all the effort," she said, and her mouth quirked up at one corner. "I hate you. I don't require you to do anything more to convince me. I hate you. More than anyone else aside from your master. I hate you. I hold you partly responsible for every person who has died so far in this war and every person who will die. You don't need to convince me that you're a monster, I already know it. Healing you when you're injured is not because of my bleeding heart. And not hexing you when you're severely wounded isn't sentiment. It's simply the last bit of decency I have left. All the rest of my goodness has already been destroyed by you. So—despite what you fling in my face, I will not let you have it. Now— fuck off." Goodness, it felt nice to have finally gotten that off her chest. She'd probably regret saying it all later, but in the moment she only felt relief.

Malfoy smirked faintly. "Good to know."

Hermione laid back on the floor and stared at the ceiling.

After several minutes of silence it was clear he was not going to go away. She gave up driving him off. She was overwhelmed by her desire to talk. She sat up on the floor.

"What are you like drunk, Malfoy?" she said, turning her head to look at him. He was standing beside her and staring down where she sat at his feet.

He looked surprised by the question. "Quieter. And angrier."

She snorted. "Of course. Heaven forbid you be anything interesting."

"I didn't have you down as a weepy drunk." He raised an eyebrow and conjured a chair, which he straddled beside her. It occurred to her that he probably couldn't lean against anything. She

wondered how much it might have hurt to pull her out of the creek and then apparate when she was struggling and trying to fight him off. “I wasn’t always,” she said wistfully. “Talkative, always. But alcohol makes me emotional. I used to be a happy drunk. I was just—ridiculous. I went to a party where the punch was spiked and I got so smashed. Harry had to silence me while he and Ron were dragging me through the halls. I was giggling so uncontrollably. Peals of laughter just—bouncing off the walls. Filch nearly caught us.”

“When was that?” he asked.

“My birthday. I turned seventeen. It was—it was the day before you killed Dumbledore.” Her jaw trembled slightly, and she looked down at her fingers as they traced a knothole on the floor. “I—was supposed to have been in the hallway the next day. Prefect duty, to help the first years. But I was so hungover. I slept late. I’ve often wondered—if it would have made any difference...”

“It wouldn’t have,” he said.

“I’ve always cried since then. Always. Not that I get drunk often. I tend to say things that piss people off.”

“You always do that,” he said, giving her a pointed look.

“I say more things that piss people of,” she amended. “Anyway—tonight it was drunk or high or abusing potions.”

“And the creek?”

“I don’t have anywhere to go. I can’t go to a pub. Or get drunk around anyone in the Order. It’s not like Moody is a shoulder to cry on.” “Potter and Weasley?”

“Since they don’t know about you—how would I explain anything?” She wasn’t going to mention that they had both gone off without her to hunt horcruxes.

“I can’t believe you couldn’t just leave me alone,” she said. “Why were you even there?”

“I had a feeling you were going to go do something asinine. Call it a sixth sense.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t see why you’d care. Your secret would die with me. I’m sure you’ll still find a way to get whatever it is you want without me.”

“I’m sure anyone Moody sent to try to replace you with would only be more irritating,” he said with a faint grimace. “Think of it as an additional favour to your Order. I’m keeping their healer and Potion Mistress alive.”

She snorted. She was starting to feel incredibly sleepy. The thought of sleeping made her think of Colin. Tears welled up in her eyes. She covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

“What now?” Malfoy said as her sobs subsided. He sounded bored, but when she looked at him, he glanced away. He'd been watching her.

“I’m going to dream about Colin tonight,” she said sadly, dropping her head against her knees.

“You were delusional when you said you could ever kill anyone. You can’t even handle them dying at someone else’s hand,” he said, shaking his head dismissively.

Hermione stiffened and stared up at Malfoy. “I don’t think there’s anything particularly awful about dying. I know it’s war. People die,” she said. “What I care about is the manner. You have no idea, Malfoy, what it’s like to have someone die while you are doing *everything* in your power to save them. He died slowly, screaming the whole time, and I was trying to save him. That’s what haunts me. All those deaths in my mind... that’s the type they are. That’s why they haunt me. They were in my hands—I was *trying* to save them—and I failed—“

She choked slightly and her voice cracked at the final words.

Malfoy looked at her and seemed considering for the first time.

“Why does Colin matter so much? You weren’t close. Why is that death the one that still remains so significant to you? You’ve seen worse deaths since then.”

She hesitated. She had never spoken about it to anyone. Not really. Not for years.

“His death was the beginning of the end of everything,” she said, looking down and noticing a snagged thread on her shirt. She tugged impulsively at it and watched the knitted fabric tighten and bunch until the thread suddenly snapped and a hole appeared. She repaired it with a flick of her wand. “He was the first person who died entirely under my care. Harry saw it happen. And after that—I realised that what the Order was doing wasn’t enough. That defense wasn’t enough. And I started saying so. But Harry disagreed. To him—dying is the worst thing. It’s leaving. So, killing in any way is evil. Self defense. Mercy killing. Any kind. That—disagreement—sent us in different directions in the war. Nothing was the same after that. That’s why I ended up a healer while everyone else went to the battlefield together.”

“Somewhat ironic.”

“One person using Dark Arts in the battlefield isn’t enough to make a difference. And if I’d been insubordinate and tried to recruit people into my thinking—it might have split the Order.”

“If you were fighting again, how would you kill?“

“Quick. There are spells to stop hearts. Curses that suffocate. Slicing hexes to the throat. I’d do things like that. I’d probably even use the killing curse if I had it in me—but Harry would probably never forgive it.”

“How does Potter plan to defeat the Dark Lord?”

“It’s—there’s a prophecy. Harry thinks the answer is the prophecy.” she said vaguely. She wasn’t sure if the Power of Love was a real Order strategy, but Malfoy didn’t really need to know the details.

“Fantastic. We’re all betting our lives on the-boy-who-won’t-kill and a prophecy. We’re doomed.”

“Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald without killing him,” Hermione said.

Malfoy looked unimpressed.

“Where did you study healing?” he asked her. She looked over at him with surprise.

“France at first,” she said, “but the war crossed the channel quickly and it was safer for me to transfer than risk being found there. So I went to Albania; their Old Magicks Department had the

best fundamentals for healing Dark Magic. I was there for a while. That's where I learned the treatment I've used on your runes. You're lucky—I'm probably one of the only healers left who knows the treatment since the hospital was destroyed. Then Denmark, for spell analysis and deconstruction. After that I went to Egypt; their hospital was the most specialised for curse breaking, but the situation was—unstable, so I got transferred to Austria within a few weeks. I was in Austria until the Order brought me back."

"A lot of people thought you died, or ran," Malfoy said, studying her with hooded eyes. "Until the Dark Lord wanted to know why the Resistance was surviving after their hospital was razed, and Severus mentioned that Potter's little Mudblood friend had been recalled from her journey abroad, healer and potion mistress to boot. It caused a slight stir among the upper-ranks." She looked at him sharply. So he'd known what she was when he made his demands. She wondered if that had played any part in his decision.

The conversation stalled. After a few more minutes Hermione stood up.

"I'm sober enough to apparate now," she said.

"You're not going to go off and get drunk somewhere else are you?" he asked, staring at her suspiciously.

She shook her head.

"No. You have quite thoroughly killed my buzz. And I'm sufficiently cried out."

He looked faintly relieved. "Don't splinch yourself," he drawled after her as she went out the door.

Hermione didn't. When she got back to Grimmauld Place she went up to her potion cabinet and downed a sobriety potion. The headache and nausea promptly dropped down upon her with all the subtlety of a sledge hammer.

She dropped her head down onto the worktop and groaned.

Trust Draco Malfoy to not even allow her to get drunk in peace. Sodding bastard.

She had expected sobriety to fill her with horror, but she felt surprisingly unrepentant for finally lashing out at him. It certainly hadn't seemed to surprise or upset him. He'd been waiting for it.

She found herself entirely at a loss about how to interpret or process all that had occurred.

She fumbled through the cabinet for a vial of headache relief and downed it, trying to focus.

Draco thought of himself as a villain.

That was an important realisation. Possibly the most important one she had yet made regarding him. The inconsistency that was in the heart of him.

She wracked her mind replaying everything he had said that day. Now that she'd vented all of her rage at him, her mind felt suddenly crystal clear.

" *Then the littler one stepped in a badger hole and broke his leg. He started crawling through the grass. Quite an easy target for a killing curse. The second person I cursed in the back with it. You know...the killing curse. It takes something out of you. It's not something just anyone can throw*

*around. Not repeatedly. Colin could have kept running. If he had he might still be alive today. But he stopped. For his dead brother he stopped, ran back, and tried to drag the body with him."*

Hermione froze. He could have killed Dennis Creevey in an innumerable number of crueler, slower ways than the killing curse. With a broken leg, Dennis was no flight risk. He would have been the perfect lure to draw Colin back. But—rather than just stand over injured Dennis and catch both boys—Draco had killed him, humanely. Possibly in the hope that a dead brother would drive Colin off and spare his life.

Hermione felt ready to fall over at the dual realisation that struck her.

Malfoy had been trying to spare Colin.

But, possibly of greater significance for Hermione, Malfoy didn't regard that detail as redeeming.

He'd been certain she'd become completely mindless with hatred for him once she knew he'd been involved at all. The unintended admission that he'd been trying to let the boys escape wasn't a way of trying to excuse himself. She suspected he didn't even register it as such.

Malfoy considered himself a villain because of what he did. Which implied that he didn't want to do it. Which implied that his desire to aid the Order might be sincere and not merely a means to some other end.

Hermione drummed her fingers on the worktop thoughtfully, re-evaluating once more everything she thought she knew of Draco Malfoy.

*Flashback 12*

**August 2002**

*“Find each person’s “handle,” his weak point. The art of moving people’s wills involves more skill than determination. You must know how to get inside the other person...First size up someone’s character and then touch on his weak point. ”*

Hermione stayed up half the night re-analysing Draco. She scrapped her entire notebook and started a new one.

She felt as though she were brimming with new theories about him. She wasn’t sure if any of them were based on reality or merely brought on by her sleep deprivation, but she felt as though she had hit upon something. As though she were breaking into a muggle vault and finally heard the first tumbler click into place. A warm sense of elation made her smile to herself while she brewed potions that day.

Her heart felt almost light.

This could work. She could win. She could bring him to heel. Seal his loyalty.

She hadn’t realized how much the belief that he was simply a monster with a moral code had convinced her that she could never succeed. She’d had a sense of certainty that eventually he’d turn and kill her along with everyone else; it had been entrenched. Despite her heavy reliance upon occlumency the conviction had bled into how she thought and treated him as a whole.

Despite the game they played. He’d kissed her and taught her occlumency. He’d told her she could say no. And she healed him and followed his instructions about dueling and exercising. Beneath the learning and the partial niceties, it always felt like they were two vipers waiting for the other to finally strike.

Now she was reconsidering.

He was not a monster. Not entirely. He was trying to fix something. There were some sort of amends that he was trying to make. Not for killing Dumbledore or anyone else, but for something.

He knew he was fallen. Somewhere along the way something had happened that he was willing to suffer for, even die because of. Something he was trying to make right. He wasn’t a spy out of ambition. He wasn’t just playing the Order and the Death Eaters against each other in order to come out on top. He was trying to fix something.

Not the war. Not the killing. But there was something he was trying to make amends for.

Her initial assessment had been right. Draco Malfoy wasn’t all ice. Under the death, rage and darkness there was more to him. She could use it. Hermione doubted he’d tell her what was driving him. He was clearly determined not to reveal it. Playing a game of misdirection until her head spun. But she could be patient. Now that she had figured out that spying was some sort of penance

for—something. If she refused to really hate him now; if she continued to be kind and comforting and interesting and clever to him. She could find a way in. She could win.

As evening drew on and she got ready to go tend to his back, she took a moment to pause and steady herself.

She'd have to start over again.

There was something between them that—that she had difficulty letting herself think about too carefully. A tension between them that she'd likely wrecked with her outburst.

She'd have to begin cultivating it again carefully.

She had to be subtle.

Subtle as poison.

Hermione closed her eyes and shifted through her memories; winnowing out her strongest feelings and setting them aside.

Tamping down on her elation, on her bubbly sense of inner-confidence; stifling them until she was clear-headed. Focused.

She apparated to the shack one minute before eight.

When Malfoy appeared, she stared at him for a moment before dropping her eyes, biting her lip and awkwardly fidgeting with her cuticles.

"Sorry…" she mumbled. "You were right. I was careless last night. It won't happen again."

She looked up through her lashes to see if Malfoy was even remotely convinced by the apology.

"Good," he said, staring across the room. "I'm not your keeper. I'm not interested in having to monitor you in order to keep you alive."

"It won't happen again," she reiterated.

He eyed her for a moment and then looked away, summoning a chair from across the room and straddling it while starting to unbutton his shirt. Hermione drew it off his shoulders and surveyed the runes.

She rested her fingers lightly on the top of his shoulder as she leaned forward to get a better look. Malfoy didn't flinch when she touched him. He tensed though, slightly. "Do you have a time when you want me to close the incisions?" she asked in a low voice as she used her fingers and wand to ease the salve out and inspected the raw edges of the cuts.

It still looked unbearably painful. She wasn't sure how Malfoy was even functioning, much less apparating, much less dueling. Every time she saw the wounds it made her cringe.

He didn't say anything.

She rested her hand on his spine. "I'm going to use the cleansing charm now."

She felt Malfoy tense under her hand and saw his knuckles whiten slightly. She counted to three and cast. His whole body shook faintly.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “If there were any way for me to repair this faster or at least relieve the pain, I would.”

“I am aware,” he said in a tight voice.

She applied the salve as lightly as she could.

“Would Monday work?” she asked, drawing her fingertips along his bare shoulders trying to get him to release the pained tension that radiated through him. “I can skip dinner if you need me to come earlier.”

“Monday,” he said after a pause. “Eight is fine.”

“Alright.”

She recast the protective spells. Then she studied the runes again, brushing her fingers near them. She could barely feel the magic in them. It had sunk in; become a part of him.

She could barely feel any Dark Magic around him at all. Not anymore. Not for weeks.

“Do you—feel the runes?” she asked. “Can you tell if they’re affecting you?”

He seemed to be considering.

“Yes,” he said after a moment, straightening. “They don’t countermand my own behavior, but it’s as though new elements have been written in. It’s easier to be ruthless. Somewhat harder to dissuade myself from impulses. Not that I had much distracting me before, but now everything else feels even less consequential.”

Hermione read the vow again.

“Did you know when he was cutting them which runes he was choosing?” she asked.

“I chose them,” he said, pulling his shirt up and rebuttoning it.

Hermione looked at him stunned. “It was my penance. I already had to grovel. If I chose them I was able to ensure he wasn’t going to insert anything problematic. That’s why there are so many, I didn’t want to leave any room for additional promises. He had to be convinced of my remorse,” he said as he stood up. His eyes reminded Hermione of a storm.

“Although,” he said, and his lip curled faintly, the rage in his eyes becoming obvious, “he failed to mention that they would take so long to heal until after the fact. In retrospect, I should have anticipated that additional punishment.”

“When I close them, it will take a while in order to ensure the scar tissue won’t restrict your movement. You’ll have to stay awake to tell me. You—may want to bring something to drink.”

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed and he stared at Hermione for several seconds.

“I’m not going to drink around you, Granger.”

She shrugged. “It’s just a suggestion. I’ll bring something in case you change your mind. But I imagine the alcohol I can afford is more inexpensive than you’ll appreciate.”

He snorted.

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

He vanished without another word.

The following night he was in a tetchy mood, and Hermione refrained from speaking to him as she treated him. However, she noticed that he had begun relaxing slightly into her touch. She doubted he was even conscious of it.

Hermione, for her part, had realised that she had grown comfortable with him. With the taint of Dark Magic no longer hanging about him, her instinctive fear had faded. She didn’t hesitate to touch him, didn’t experience any tingle of dread in her spine. She no longer tensed, bracing herself that he might lash out.

He felt familiar.

On Saturday, a soothing charm finally stuck to the incisions when she cast it and Draco shuddered significantly less when she cast the cleansing charm.

“The venom is finally gone,” she told him with relief. She summoned her satchel over and dug through it for an analgesic potion that she had developed. She drew some cloths out and, after placing a barrier spell on her hand so that it wouldn’t go numb, poured the analgesic out until the fabric was drenched.

“This will feel cold and sting for a moment, but then it will numb the incisions,” she said. “I’m going to start on the top of your left shoulder.” She rested her fingers just above the first rune for a second before she gently laid the cloth over his shoulder and lightly pressed it against the incisions underneath. He shivered.

She set a timer for the left shoulder and turned to attend the right.

“They shouldn’t hurt now but they’re still open wounds on your back,” she said. “Don’t go do something stupid Iike getting into a fight with a werewolf just because you aren’t in agonising pain anymore.”

“Will you sign off on my werewolf fighting Tuesday?” he asked in a snide voice.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“I’d advise giving the scar tissue at least three days to set before fighting any werewolves.”

He chuckled faintly.

The conversation stalled after that, but the evening ended on a surprisingly cordial note.

Hermione was in a somewhat cheerful mood when she apparated back to Grimmauld Place. As she landed on the steps, her bracelet suddenly grew red hot.

She flung the door open and found it in chaos. There was blood smeared across the floor.
“Hermione,” Neville shouted. “It’s Ginny.”

Hermione bolted up the steps as quickly as she could, avoiding the blood spilled across the floor.

Harry, Ron and all the other resident Weasleys were there. Pomfrey and Padma were hovering over a bed where Ginny was lying.

“What happened?” she demanded, dropping her satchel and rushing over. Ginny was unconscious and had a large, ragged gash along her face. Blood was pouring from it.

“Necrosis curse hit her on the cheek,” Pomfrey said, between spells. “They cut it out as quick as they could, but we’ve never had anyone make it back after being struck in the head.”

“Padma! Blood replenishing potion!” Hermione barked as she cast her own spells. Brain damage was not one of Hermione’s specialties. Normally when curses reached the brain the damage was beyond healing.

She cast the most complex brain scan spells she knew and studied them.

“It didn’t reach her brain,” she gasped with relief. Then she cast another diagnostic over Ginny’s head. The ragged, hurried cuts made it hard to read any other details. She couldn’t see any obvious indicators of remaining necrosis, but Hermione didn’t trust Fate to be kind. She snatched Pomfrey’s wand from her hand without asking, muttered a charm and began using the second wand tip delved into the diagnostic layers, looking for any remaining traces of rot hiding beneath all the tissue damage she was reading from the removal process. There…

“There’s necrosis in her zygomatic and frontal bones. I have to remove them now,” Hermione said. “Everyone get out!”

There was protesting which she ignored as she cast more blood staunching spells, trying to see exactly where the curse was still eating into Ginny.

“Give her one drop of Draught of Living Death,” she ordered Padma who had just poured blood replenishing potion down Ginny’s throat. “It will slow the recovery but we can’t risk her moving.”

Hermione grit her teeth and prayed as she summoned potions from the cabinet and began to cast a series of intricate spells and wards over Ginny’s head. Many of which she had never used before or only used once.

Trying to remove any sections of the skull was horrendously risky in any situation, but far worse when trying to accomplish it rapidly. It was going to expose the sinuses, Ginny would lose her entire eye socket, and part of her frontal lobe would be exposed until the bones grew back.

Staring at the black spots on Ginny’s exposed skull that were now growing before her eyes Hermione cast a hair removal charm and then spread a thick, purple potion very carefully around the edges of the gash and then out across more than half of Ginny’s head and face. When it was carefully and evenly spread Hermione cast a setting charm. The potion grew hard and shell-like. An exoskeleton.

Hermione took a steadying breath and banished each section of Ginny’s skull.

The exoskeleton potion externally held the areas which no longer had bone structure supporting them. Hermione recast the diagnostic and checked repeatedly and thoroughly. The necrosis was gone. The bones had been removed before the curse reached through to Ginny’s brain.

Hermione collapsed slightly and felt tempted to sob with relief. It had been so close. So very close. Closer than she would ever tell anyone.

She steadied her hands and administered Skele-Gro. She added several monitor wards and several

more protective wards around Ginny's exposed brain. Then she set a timer.

With the interference of Draught of Living Death the bone regrowth would take ten hours. She couldn't start repairing the gash until the bones had been regrown completely or the repaired tissue would have nothing to form over. Ginny would carry a cruel looking scar for the rest of her life, but she would live. Whoever had cut out the necrosis had done it quick enough to save her.

Hermione took Ginny's hand in her own and stroked it gently. She was covered in blood. Hermione cast cleaning charms across Ginny's body and changed her into into hospital robes with a few flicks of her wand. Then Hermione cast diagnostic charms over the rest of Ginny to ensure she wasn't injured anywhere else.

There was a scrape on her calf and bruising on one arm. Hermione fixed them in a few minutes.

Hermione stood and picked up both of the wands beside her.

"Sorry," she said, handing Poppy her wand back. Grabbing a person's wand without permission was grossly offensive.

Poppy stashed her wand with a shaken expression.

"I had already cast four diagnostics before you came and none of them showed the remaining bone necrosis. I've never seen a diagnostic dissected compositionally before. I'm glad you didn't waste time asking permission."

"I read about it in a book on healing theory. Brain diagnostics are difficult. There's so much activity that the magic picks up. They're hard even for specialists to read quickly. It was just luck it worked."

Hermione sighed and wanted to sit down. Now that the crisis had passed, she was able to feel her heart pounding and her hands shaking. She felt light headed and on the verge of falling over backwards.

"I should go let everyone know she's alright," she said shakily.

Harry and Ron and almost everyone else in Grimmauld Place were waiting outside the doors of the hospital ward.

"She's alright," Hermione said as she opened the door. "She'll be alright."

Harry gave a sob and slumped back against the wall.

"Oh, thank Merlin," Charlie muttered.

Ron rubbed his eyes and Hermione saw blood on his hands and all over his clothing. She approached him and cast a subtle diagnostic as she did so. He was uninjured. It was all Ginny's blood.

"Did you remove the necrosis?" she asked Ron.

He nodded and his pale blue eyes flooded briefly with tears. His whole body was shaking as though he were going into shock.

"You saved her, Ron," she said, pulling him down into a hug. "You bought her enough time to get

back. If you hadn't, it might have been too late, or she might have lost her eye. She'll have a scar, but she's going to be fine." "Oh Merlin," Ron collapsed slightly in Hermione's arms. "Lucius showed up. We apparated but when we landed we realized Ginny was hit. When I saw it—"

He dragged his hand across his eyes and it smeared blood across his pale skin. His hands were shaking uncontrollably.

"All I could think of was when Dad came back. And after George. And now Gin—and I— she looked at me and I knew I had to try. It was—it was worse than anything—"

Ron sobbed and buried his head into Hermione's shoulder. She wrapped her arms around him tightly.

"I just kept trying to tell myself it was to save h-her," he mumbled into her shoulder. "Mum —I promised Mum I'd keep her safe—told her I'd never let anything happen to Gin."

"You did save her," Hermione said into his ear. "You did exactly what you needed to do."

"I am going to kill the Malfoys," he muttered into her ear. "Lucius and Malfoy, I'm going to kill them both. I don't care if I have to wait until after the war to do it.That family deserves to die."

Hermione didn't let the circles she was rubbing into Ron's shoulders falter. She just hugged him tighter.

The oath to kill the Malfoys was an increasingly common refrain among the Weasleys; the primary exception to their firm opposition to killing. It had started after Dumbledore's death, but grown more frequent after Bill returned from a mission dragging his wailing father with him. Lucius Malfoy had made a point of identifying himself immediately after cursing Arthur with some obscure spell that had resulted in giving Arthur the mental capacity of a toddler.

Hermione had gone through every healing manual and obscure book of curses that she could get her hands upon but she never managed to find out what the curse was or any means by which to reverse or lessen the effects.

In some ways, Hermione sometimes guiltily thought, it was worse than if Arthur had died. Which was probably what Lucius had intended. Arthur Weasley was gone, except not. His friendly, curious, affectionate self remained, trapped in the body of a middle-aged man and a child's mind. He needed to be watched constantly. He would only mind a few people, and was prone to having explosions of accidental magic and minor seizures when upset. His effective loss was a staggering, dual setback for the Order. Molly had to step away almost entirely to care for her husband full time. She had taken him to live at one of the hospice safe houses. When George was able to leave the hospital ward at Grimmauld Place, he had joined his mother in helping to care for his father.

"You are a good brother," Hermione murmured to Ron. When his shaking finally eased she pulled back slightly in order to ask the question pressing in her mind. "Ron, can you tell me what you used to remove the necrosis? Was it spellwork or a knife?"

"A knife. One of the ones from Harry's vault," he said.

"Can I see it?" she asked steadily.

"Sure," Ron said, somewhat confused. He glanced around looking slightly dazed still. "I think it's

downstairs. Neville has our stuff."

Hermione stepped back and poked her head into the hospital ward.

"Poppy, can you check Harry and Ron for injuries? And administer a Draught of Peace? Double for Ron. I need to check something."

Hermione made her way downstairs. Neville and Hannah Abbott were mopping up the floor with magic.

"Nev, can you show me Ron's rucksack?"

He nodded over toward the corner.

"It's the one with all the blood on it. I haven't cleaned it yet."

Hermione went over and started going through it carefully. The contents had been flung in haphazardly. There was blood drying on everything. Shoved into a outer pocket she caught sight of a knife handle.

She pulled it out carefully. It was goblin-wrought, as she had suspected.

She carried it into the kitchen and washed the blood off. Then she pulled a small piece of raw chicken from the stasis bin and ran the entire blade of the knife lightly across the meat. The magically sharp edge sliced effortlessly. Then Hermione laid the knife carefully aside and stared down at the chicken.

A minute passed. Then two. Hermione wondered if she'd been mistaken. Then, a small speck of darkness appeared on the chicken. Hermione stared and watched as it slowly grew larger and larger over the next several minutes.

Hermione cast a stasis charm but it had no effect on the rot steadily spreading across the meat.

She cast a barrier charm on the blade of the knife, and several protective wards. Then she wrapped it in several towels and put a repelling charm on the whole thing. Then she placed it in a drawer which she locked and booby-trapped with several stinging hexes and an alarm.

She turned and went back up to the hospital ward.

Harry was sitting next to Ginny, holding her hand. His eyes were huge and devastated and his face was pale. He was chewing nervously on his lip. When Hermione laid her hand lightly on his shoulder, he started and looked sharply up at her. He smiled thinly. A hospital smile. A rictus. The faint, wan tightening across the face that givers made with the intention of appearing encouraging or stalwart, but which alway just looked fractured.

When Ginny woke she would wear the same expression while she reassured everyone that she was fine; that she didn't mind her scar; that she really was fine.

Hermione smiled sadly down at Harry and conjured a chair in order to join him

"She shouldn't have come," Harry said after a minute.

"The Order decided what the best unit would be, she wasn't there because of you two," Hermione said. "Lucius' grudge doesn't have anything to do with whether you and Ginny are together."

“I’m going to have to tell them not to pair us anymore,” Harry said, looking up from Ginny’s hand to stare into the distance.

His expression was dazed and his bright emerald eyes didn’t seem to see the hospital ward. Hermione recognized the expression. He was back on the mission, reliving it over and over, in order to berate himself over what had gone wrong.

“It was all my fault,” he said. His voice was small, quavering slightly. “I should have put the wards up sooner. The mission was so easy. Pointless. It was like a trip with her and Ron. Like we were camping for fun. I let my guard down.”

Hermione said nothing. It was confession. He was so stunned and grieved that he had things he needed to say. He just needed to verbalise it. He couldn’t tell Ron. He felt too guilty to direct it at Ginny beside him.

Hermione had listened to a lot of confessions from those on bedside vigil in the hospital ward. Sometimes she felt like a priest.

“After we got away—when I saw it on her face—I froze,” he said after several moments of silence. “When I saw she’d been hit. I didn’t—She started crying. And Ron stunned her. And I was just standing there. I just stood there while he was cutting her face up. I barely snapped out of it enough to apparate us back. Ron had to do almost everything. It was just like Colin. I just stood there.”

“No one could have saved Colin,” Hermione said quietly.

“I could have helped save Ginny!” Harry snapped suddenly furious. “What if she had died? And I had just been standing there? The woman I love—my best friend’s sister. I just stood there and watched her face rot—”

He dropped Ginny’s hand and shoved his glasses up, rubbing his eyes.

“What if she’d died? Or become like Arthur? Because I was careless and didn’t put the wards up?” Harry’s voice was trembling and his hands were clenched into fists. Hermione could feel the magic shivering around him as his guilt and emotions continued to grow. Hermione summoned a flagon of Calming Draught and transfigured a piece of cotton dressing into a cup which she filled. She held it and waited for a moment in which to give it to Harry. If she handed it over too soon, it would be thrown into a wall.

“No one responds perfectly every time,” she said.

“It can’t happen again,” Harry said flatly. “I’m not going to risk it.

Hermione said nothing, and after a minute Harry slumped against her. She slipped the cup of Calming Draught into his hand. Then she rested her head on top of his. “She’s going to be alright,” she said. “I promise. She’s alright.”

Harry nodded, and Hermione gave herself a moment to just be with him. Her best friend.

Most days it felt as though they lived in separate worlds.

The boy who saved her from a troll. Who she’d brewed polyjuice potion for. Who she travelled back in time with in order to save his godfather. The friend she’d taught the accio spell. Who she’d set up

Dumbledore's Army with.

He had carried on as a hero, but somehow Hermione's path had split off from his.

He turned to her as a healer, but rarely as a friend.

She laced her fingers through his chaotic hair.

"Ginny is in love with you, you know," she said. "Don't push her away. Don't do that to her. Don't do that to yourself. You're already both in danger because of this war. You shouldn't give up the happiness you have. Don't let Tom take that from you."

Harry didn't say anything, but he downed the Draught of Peace while he kept staring at Ginny.

"Can she hear me?" he asked after several minutes, his voice sad and hopeful.

"No, sorry. I put her in stasis until her bones regrow and I can fix the cut. It would be dangerous for her to move when her brain is exposed. She'll be awake tomorrow."

They sat together in silence for several minutes until a silvery bulldog came barreling into the hospital ward.

"Potter, Granger, mission debrief in five minutes," growled Moody's voice before the patronus vanished.

Harry sighed and stood up.

"I guess I'll see you in there," he said, stroking Ginny's hand one last time. Hermione watched him walk out and then turned to Ginny. She cast a few diagnostics to confirm that everything was stable and regrowing the way it was supposed to. Then she went downstairs and got the knife out of the kitchen drawer before going to the dining room where Order meetings were held.

Remus and Tonks were already there, and smiled at Hermione when she entered and found her seat. Bill walked in a few minutes later. He and Fleur alternated meeting attendance so that one of them was always monitoring the prison. Charlie followed, still looking as pale as he had been when Hermione had announced that Ginny would be alright. Neville entered next, followed by Amelia Bones. Then Ron and Harry. Kingsley Shacklebolt and Alastor Moody entered behind them.

It was less than a quarter of the current Order. Only a handful of members were informed about the horcruxes. The Order had learned through hard experience the danger of letting too many know too much when their opponent was an accomplished legilimens. Molly and Minerva rarely attended any meetings although they were technically still in an intelligence tier high enough to receive all information. Severus only attended top level meetings scheduled with more advanced warning.

"Harry, Ron. We'd like a full report on your horcrux hunt," Kingsley said without any preamble. "There's nothing to report," Harry said flatly. "We went all the way to Albania and couldn't find anything. We didn't see anyone or have any trouble until Lucius showed up."

"How did Lucius find you?" Moody asked, his eye rolling across Harry and Ron slowly.

"I don't know," Harry said, "we'd just started to set up camp. The wards weren't up but we'd been there less than fifteen minutes."

“Where were you?”

“Somewhere either in France or Belgium, I think. Some forest. We were planning to apparate back the rest of the way tomorrow.”

There were several seconds of silence.

“Do you have anything else to report?” Kingsley asked.

Harry and Ron looked at each other and shook their heads.

Everyone’s expressions hardened in disappointment.

Hermione took a deep breath and steeled herself. There was a chance that she was just being pessimistic, but given her track record in Order meetings she was not feeling particularly hopeful about the reaction to what she was going to announce.

“I have something to report,” she said quietly.

*Flashback 13*

**August 2002**

Everyone looked sharply over toward Hermione.

She laid the knife on the table and cast a quick spell to unwrap it.

“The mission wasn’t entirely pointless. I think I’ve figured out how we can destroy the horcruxes, assuming we can find them. I’ve been studying how goblin-wrought weapons absorb anything that makes them more powerful. I wasn’t sure exactly how the absorption worked; whether it involved a spell or not. But when I was healing Ginny, I noticed that the spots where the necrosis was still spreading had slight nicks in the bone. It gave me an idea, so afterward, I went and found the knife that was used to remove the curse.”

She lifted the knife up carefully.

“This goblin-wrought knife has the necrosis curse in its blade now. I confirmed in the kitchen and I can demonstrate it if anyone needs to see it. When the curse was cut off Ginny, the blade must have touched the necrosis somewhere and absorbed the magic. So when it touched the bones of Ginny’s skull it spread the necrosis to new locations.”

Ron paled and looked ready to be sick. Hermione shot him an apologetic glance.

“Ginny is going to be fine. And no one could have known that would happen. A goblin-wrought blade was a logical choice because it would cut more reliably than a non-magical knife,” she said firmly to him.

“But it gave me an idea,” she continued, “about how we might be able to destroy the horcruxes. We know they’re dangerous and hard to destroy because even Dumbledore got terminally cursed destroying one. Harry destroyed the journal with a basilisk fang, but we can’t access those unless we can break into Hogwarts and get down into the Chamber of Secrets. But we have the sword of Gryffindor, and I think it might be able to destroy the horcruxes if we used it.”

The room was staring at Hermione blankly.

“It’s goblin-wrought,” she pointed out, “and Harry used it to kill the basilisk. So, that means it should be infused with basilisk venom.”

She glanced around trying to gauge the reactions. Moody and Kingsley both looked thoughtful. Ron still looked ashen.

“It could be true,” Remus said slowly, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “What you said about goblin-wrought materials is certainly accurate.”

“Do we know where the sword of Gryffindor is?” asked Bill. “I think Minerva has it,” Neville said. “I think I saw it when I was helping with the garden at Caithness.”

“We’ll ask Severus about the venom,” said Moody. “He’ll know if anyone does.”

Harry and Charlie’s faces soured visibly at mention of Snape. “I can meet with him.” Hermione volunteered. “I need to discuss some details regarding potions and curses anyway.”

“Alright. Report to me afterward. We won’t reconvene until next week,” Moody said with a nod.

“We should do something with that knife,” Remus said. “It won’t be safe, someone might pick it up.”

Hermione pushed it into the middle of the table.

“It has some protective wards on it, but I’m not sure how well they stick.”

“I’ll deal with it,” Moody said, summoning it over to himself. “I’ll send word to Severus.”

Moody turned and stumped out.

When Hermione returned to the hospital ward after a late dinner, Harry was sitting beside Ginny again. All the lights dancing around Ginny’s body were in normal, reassuring hues, but Hermione paused to cast a diagnostic to make sure everything was still alright.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Harry said, while she was in the midst of casting.

“What do you mean?” she asked, pausing mid-spell to look at him. Her breath caught slightly in her chest and her grip on her wand tightened.

“Using Ginny’s injury like that.” Harry’s voice hard and tight. “You made it sound like it was somehow a good thing she got hurt.”

Hermione sighed, and fought against an urge to roll her eyes.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” she said. “You know I hate it when anyone gets hurt.”

“You should have waited. You could have brought it up at the next meeting when Ron wasn’t feeling so awful. Did you even comfort him because you cared, or just because you wanted to know where the knife was?”

Hermione’s hands dropped to her sides and her eyes narrowed as her irritation with Harry bloomed into offense.

“I wanted to make sure he hadn’t cut himself with it. I wanted to make sure no one else found it and got injured with it,” she said in a steely voice. Harry sighed and glanced over toward her sharply.

“But that’s what you were thinking about. When Ginny was hurt and you were healing her, what you were thinking about was ‘Oh look, nicks in her skull. I wonder if this information will be useful for destroying horcruxes.’ Your roommate was lying there while you treated her, and that’s what you were thinking about. One of your best friends was crying in your arms because he had to cut up his baby sister’s face, and all you were thinking about was that fucking knife.”

Hermione balled her left hand into a fist so tight she could feel her nails biting into her palm and the shape of her metacarpal bones under her fingertips.

“I am capable of thinking of multiple things at once, Harry.” Her tone was icy. “Or would you rather

that the mission had been entirely pointless? That Ginny got hurt and it didn't mean anything?"
"Don't treat it like that, Hermione. Don't treat people like they're nothing but an equation to you."

Harry stood up abruptly and stared angrily at her.

Hermione twitched slightly. She couldn't understand the emotional reasoning that Harry employed. It was exhausting to try to figure out where he was coming from. It ate into mental resources she couldn't afford to give him.

"Either this all happens for a reason or it doesn't," she said with cold rage. "You can't have it both ways. If this is all supposed to be meaningful then you can't get offended when I point it out and accuse me of being callous."

Harry paled further and dragged a frustrated hand through his hair. He stared at her with his eyes flashing for a moment before turning away, his lips curled slightly.

"The way you treat people… sometimes, I feel like I don't even know you anymore," he said.

"Maybe you don't," she said in a clipped tone, staring down at her wand, finishing the diagnostic on Ginny.

"You should have waited, you shouldn't have talked about the knife tonight. It's not like we have a horcrux. You could have waited," he said again as though it were the final conclusion of their conversation.

Hermione pursed her lips slightly and took a breath before responding.

"The war isn't going to wait for us to grieve, I'm sorry you disagree with my decision. I didn't mean for it to hurt anyone."

Harry turned away from her.

Hermione walked into the next room and leaned against the wall, feeling somewhat frozen. Her hands were trembling slightly. Her stomach felt as though it had been twisted viciously. She regretted eating anything.

She took several deep breaths through her nose and pressed the palms of her hands hard against the wall as she tried to recentre.

She shook her head and tried not to let herself dwell on what Harry had said.

After another minute she straightened and glanced down at her watch to check the time. Ginny's bones still had hours to regrow.

Hermione mulled over the procedure. She should have Padma watch her perform it.

After Malfoy demanded her, Moody and Kingsley had decided to pull one of the field healers and have them trained to help with hospital shifts. Padma was the best field healer they had and a fair hand at potions; she was chosen to apprentice under both Hermione and Poppy.

When Kingsley informed Hermione that Padma was being assigned to the hospital, he framed it as support for Hermione because she was stretched too thin. But Hermione had been stretched too thin for years. She knew why they had reassigned Padma. They needed the redundancy because

Hermione's function as healer had become secondary to her status as Malfoy's possession. Padma was her replacement.

Now, with all the prisoners the Order had broken free recently, they could afford to give up a few more fighters to specialise in healing. Poppy was in charge of training fifty new field healers. Padma was slowly taking over Hermione's assigned hospital shifts and all the basic potions with the goal of Hermione only being on call in case of emergencies and advanced potion making; freeing her up to research and work on Malfoy.

When Hermione had informed Moody of Malfoy's intention to train her, Moody reminded her to do anything Malfoy required.

Hermione had felt slightly ill as she had agreed.

It wasn't as though she didn't agree. It was just—hard sometimes. Deep down, she wanted Moody to still seem conflicted; to show remorse over what he was steering her toward.

She wanted someone to care. To object for her. So that she wouldn't feel like such a whore as she did it.

It wasn't really rational. Strategically she knew Moody was right. Even if he didn't order her to do whatever Draco wanted, she was still intending to.

That was the bargain.

But sometimes she still wished someone would try to say no for her. So that Hermione could be reassured that the sick, clawing sensation inside of her was reasonable. That it was indeed as horrible as it felt to be sold to a Death Eater in exchange for information. Because, while Malfoy wasn't generally abusing Hermione or forcing her to have sex with him, if he were, Moody would give her the same instructions.

After all, they'd all expected Draco rape her when they'd sent her.

Somehow Hermione hadn't been prepared for how devastatingly lonely it would be to process everything alone. How her solitary mission would slowly eat her inside. Like a sinkhole inside her chest.

Of course, she could go to Minerva. Minerva would care. She'd object on behalf of Hermione. But it would be selfish of Hermione to turn to her for solace. It would just make her former Head grieve more. Hermione wasn't going to stop. She wasn't going to be dissuaded. Even if by some miracle Moody and Kingsley were.

She just wanted to stop feeling alone. To have someone tell her that what she was doing was meaningful. That it was alright that it hurt.

It was silly. Emotional. Wishing other people would be emotionally tortured on her behalf. She tried to squash it. But it kept rising up inside her.

She'd always been too desperate for verbal affirmation. To have someone tell her that she was clever, to reassure herself of her value with grades and praise.

She bit her lip. No one would ever praise her for what she was doing.

If most members of the Resistance were to learn, they'd probably accuse her of corrupting the war effort.

The war between Good and Evil was won by Good's refusal to compromise. Not by using Dark Magic. Not by selling a healer to a Death Eater for information.

Moody and Kingsley played along by allowing the Resistance's policy against Dark Art to remain in place in accordance with the Weasleys' and Harry's wishes. The public face of the Resistance was still Goodness and Light.

Hermione wondered just how many things Moody and Kingsley were doing without most of the Order knowing. Things that Hermione had also grown complicit in. Such as how Kingsley intercepted some of the snatchers and Death Eaters that Hermione was occasionally called in to heal before they were interrogated. How Bill and Fleur kept the the Order's prisoners. How prisoners were sometimes interrogated. Where certain supplies came from.

There were so many logistical details that the rest of the Order never seemed to ask about. Much in the way they never asked about where all the new information was coming from. How, after so many months and years of decreasing intel, they suddenly had much better information regarding Death Eater prisons, impending attacks in Muggle Britain, and raids against the Order. How they'd known to evacuate Caithness or that Voldemort was traveling.

Everyone seemed eager to ignore details like that. The only thing they couldn't ignore was having Severus as a spy; even after five years, they still hated it. There was a recurring argument put forth by Charlie or Ron or Harry to have Severus cut out.

Hermione sighed and went to find Padma. Even if she could sleep, it was going to be a long night.

Late the next morning she placed the final enchantments on the healing spells she used to repair Ginny's face and then administered a vial of Wiggenwald potion.

That room in the hospital ward was currently empty. Hermione had kicked everyone out over the furious objections of Harry and Ron.

Ginny's body was still for a moment and then gradually stirred. She cracked one eye and glanced around blearily.

"Ngghhh," Ginny groaned and rolled over and buried her head in her pillow.

After another moment she lifted her head and glanced around. Her hand immediately darted up to touch her bald scalp and then moved to her face. She fingered the wide scar that now lay there.

"What happened?" Ginny asked. Her voice sounded dry.

Hermione handed her a glass of water.

"Lucius Malfoy hit you with a necrosis curse on your cheek," Hermione said as gently as she could. "Ron saved you by cutting it off before it could reach your brain."

Ginny's fingers ran along the length of the scar. It started near her hairline. The gash's topmost edge began at the top of her forehead and all the way down to her jaw. It was wide and cruel looking, and it caused certain spots on her face to divot and pucker slightly.

Ginny sat up slowly and put her hands in her lap. Staring down at them as she clenched them into fists and then opened them. She was quiet for a minute.

“Can I have a mirror?” Ginny finally asked.

Hermione had a mirror ready for Ginny, but she paused before handing it over.

“It will fade. In a few months, with treatment, it will fade to silver.”

Ginny’s lower lip trembled, and she pressed her mouth into a hard line. She held her hand out for the mirror.

“Do you want me to go while you look? Or stay with you?” Hermione asked.

Ginny hesitated. “Stay…” she finally said. Hermione handed the mirror over and said nothing while Ginny took a deep breath and then turned it over to survey her face.

There was a long silence.

Ginny stared, growing paler, turning her head slowly to take in the entirety of it. Her fingers rose up slowly, tracing over it, as though she couldn’t believe it was her face she saw reflected.

After a few seconds, Ginny pressed her lips together and jerked her head as her eyes welled up with tears. She stared for a moment longer, running her fingers along the scar before pushing the mirror away.

Then Ginny took a sharp breath in through her nose like she was trying not to cry. Her lips twisted slightly and she kept pressing them together harder as she rocked in the bed.

Ginny kept drawing sharp, quick breaths through her nose. Her head jerked up with each one.

Finally her shoulders slumped.

“Oh Merlin, I’m so shallow!” she said with a slight sob. “I’m alive but I’m crying because I’ve got a scar."

Hermione felt her own jaw tremble as she rested a hand on Ginny’s shoulder.

“Scars are hard…” Hermione said, and her voice faded away as it tightened in her throat. “Anything that changes how we see ourselves is hard. You can be sad about it. You’re allowed to grieve for yourself. You don’t need to pretend it’s okay.”

“I know,” said Ginny in a thick voice. “I just want to be. I want to be fine with it. I don’t want to care. Or see it as changing me. But—I feel like part of me has died. Like I’m ruined somehow. And that feels so shallow and selfish. George lost his whole leg and I’m crying because I have a cut on my face.”

Tears streamed from Ginny’s eyes and she smeared them away with the backs of her hands.

Hermione waited for several minutes and when Ginny’s breathing and trembling finally started to ease slightly, she reached out and took Ginny’s hand.

“Harry and Ron are waiting outside,” Hermione said. “But you can take as long as you want before you see anyone.”

Ginny jerked. “Have they—did—, Ginny stuttered and shifted uncomfortably. “Has Harry already seen it?”

Hermione nodded.

“Harry has been with you the whole time. I forced him to leave. I thought—you might want some time.” Ginny nodded.

“Maybe five more minutes,” said Ginny after a moment.

Hermione sat down on the edge of Ginny’s bed.

“You’re still one of the prettiest girls I know,” Hermione told her.

Ginny snorted. “Shut up. You’d say that even if Ron had cut off my nose.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I wouldn’t. The redness will fade. If you let me treat it regularly. And use a few potions. It will become more elastic so you won’t feel it. And it will fade a lot. But if you’d like, I can help you glamour it.”

“It’s fine. I always wanted to be a badass when I was little. Can you imagine how scary I’ll look now on a battlefield? All bald and with this crazy thing on my face,” Ginny joked weakly. The frozen hospital smile curled across her face for a moment. Then the forced humor faded from her expression and she looked almost childlike.

“I miss Mum,” Ginny said in a small voice.

Even when her children were injured, Molly could rarely afford to come see them.

Hermione hugged Ginny and Ginny sniffled into her shoulder.

“Do you want to go there today?” Hermione said.

“No. She’ll just feel awful,” Ginny said, shaking her head. “I’ll go see her when it’s faded a bit. Do you have a hair regrowth potion?”

“Sorry. Not on hand. I had Padma start brewing some though. It will be done in the next hour.”

“Well, that’s a relief. At least I won’t have to be both bald and ugly forever.”

Hermione shook her head and hugged Ginny again. Ginny always tended to break out terrible jokes about herself when she was in the hospital.

When Hermione departed, Ginny was fully ensconced in the attentions of Harry and her brothers and under the watchful eye of Poppy and Padma.

Moody sent word that Severus would be home at two o’clock so Hermione apparated there a few minutes early and then approached Spinner’s End carefully. How any place could be so dreary even in summer never ceased to baffle Hermione. It was as though Severus’ personality were contagious.

The door was shut. Hermione rapped quietly and then waited. Since he was no longer a professor, even Severus’ most basic courtesy had entirely vanished. He would occasionally leave Order members waiting at his doorstep for an hour. Fred and George had once tried to just break in and came back to Grimmauld Place sporting boils across their entire bodies. Hermione stood waiting for

two minutes before pulling a book out and resigning herself. She had made it through two chapters of her psychology book before the door abruptly jerked open. She stood up quickly and followed the billowing robes that were already vanishing around the corner into the sitting room.

Severus was already seated in one of his agonisingly uncomfortable armchairs when Hermione arrived. She perched on the very edge of another chair and looked at him

“A goblin-wrought blade infused with basilisk venom. Would it be enough to destroy a horcrux?” she asked, similarly choosing to skip the basic courtesies of small talk.

Severus blinked, his onyx eyes always inscrutable. She could almost see the occlumency walls behind them.

“The sword of Gryffindor,” he said after a moment.

Hermione nodded.

“I believe it would,” he said slowly, steepling his fingers and looking thoughtful. “Although we won’t know for sure unless we find a horcrux.”

Hermione nodded with a faint sigh. Severus’ lip curled slightly and he snorted faintly.

“At times like this… I wonder just how much Albus manipulated events over the years,” he said.

Hermione stared at him in surprise. “You think second year was intentional?”

He waved her off with a flick of his wrist.

“With Albus, it’s impossible to say. But it is mysteriously convenient that we happen to have such a weapon within our grasp,” Severus said, then his expression grew harsh. “He was always quite confident about his skills of manipulation. Perhaps if he had been less opaque we would not be losing the war.”

“What do you mean?”

Severus looked at her.

“You are aware his injury from the ring was terminal. I had been preparing potions to keep the curse at bay, but his death was inevitable the moment he placed it on his hand. He planned his demise for the end of sixth year. He even requested that I kill him, rather than leave him to the final ravages of the curse. He also suspected before the term began that Draco had been assigned to try killing him as well.”

Hermione stared in shock.

“Albus was so confident that he had everything in hand that he didn’t take sufficient precautions,” Severus continued, “I cannot imagine that he would have neglected to mention the horcruxes after being cursed by one. He likely intended to inform Potter through a series of vague hints. He knew far more about the Dark Lord’s early years than anyone, but he never deigned to confide such things to others.”

Severus’ expression grew bitter and far away as he fell silent.

“He knew Draco was going to try to kill him?” Hermione asked, floored by the revelation. “Knew.

Suspected," Severus said with a faint nod. "It was hard to differentiate when it came to Albus, but yes, he was anticipating it. Unfortunately for all his plans, Draco acted much more quickly and decisively than even Albus anticipated. You would think a wizard so old would have been more meticulous, but clearly not. His overconfidence was to the detriment of all who survived him."

Severus glanced at Hermione.

"What made you suddenly think of the sword of Gryffindor?" he inquired, his tone suspiciously casual.

Hermione met his eyes.

"An injury that I encountered gave me the idea," Hermione said.

"Indeed," Severus said with an arch expression.

Hermione gave him a look. "You know about Draco's punishment.".

"Of course. I had the delightful task of milking Nagini for the venom. Alastor mentioned that you've been treating him. I was surprised to hear it."

"It's not as though he could hide the injury. Did you realise how severe it is? Tom intended to poison his magic with it. By the time I found out—," Hermione fell silent for a minute. "I wish you would have informed me, so I could have started sooner."

Severus was silent and appraising as he studied Hermione.

"You're using it," he finally said.

Hermione flushed faintly and met his eyes.

"Yes," she said. "It seemed like the logical thing to do. You were right, he is isolated. He nearly jumped out of his skin the first time I put my hands on him to heal him."

"If you had been trained by Bellatrix Lestrange for years, you would probably flinch when touched too," Severus said dryly.

Hermione paused to consider. "What do you know about his training? He's said things that— I don't understand. The cruelty employed seems excessive. Even by Death Eater standards." Severus' mouth twitched. "He was initially recruited as punishment for Lucius' failure. Consequently, I believe the Dark Lord gave Bella a rather free hand in choosing training methods. She was suspicious of my loyalty, so it was not a process I was consulted over. I do know that despite the brutality, Draco was determined. He took it and he kept coming back, even when it was no longer necessary. He was determined to climb rank. He was the youngest person to ever take the Mark. Being the lowest tier does not sit well with Malfoys."

"Was there anyone he was particularly close to in the past? Someone who died? That he cared about? His motive—it feels like atonement for something, at times."

Severus steepled his fingers and pressed them against his lips thoughtfully.

"Not that I ever observed. At least, not among his housemates," he said after a minute. Hermione sighed.

“What about his mother? He mentioned her when he first made the offer.”

“Narcissa became reclusive following Lucius’ arrest. I rarely saw her, and when she did appear she was quite withdrawn. If she ever had objections, I never heard her make them.”

“She seemed doting back in Hogwarts,” Hermione said, tilting her head to the side as she tried to remember details about Narcissa Malfoy. “But that was all by Owl Post. It doesn’t seem like she intervened on his behalf at all during his training.”

“Lucius’ imprisonment seemed to have a rather profound effect on her. Much in the way her death affected him.”

Hermione shivered slightly at the thought of Lucius.

“So Draco just fell to the wayside for them both,” she concluded, feeling sorry for him. She stifled the pity and changed the subject. “Lucius nearly killed Ginny last night. We still don’t know how he tracked them down.”

“There are genetic trace spells,” said Severus thoughtfully. “They are extremely Dark Magic, and they take quite a toll. However, I would not underestimate Lucius’ determination.”

“Are there ways to evade them?”

“I’ll send a book to Moody. I don’t imagine the Weasleys will be receptive to any protective rituals recommended by myself—or you, for that matter.”

Hermione’s mouth tightened and she looked away, feeling stung by the fair assessment. Her advocacy for Dark Magic and her defense of Severus had cost her a great deal of credibility among her friends.

She swallowed the hurt and changed the subject abruptly.

“I finally neutralised the venom in the runes. I’m going to close the incisions tomorrow night. Do you have any suggestions?” Severus snorted. “I’m sure your planned treatment will be the best he can hope for.”

Hermione stared at Severus and felt as though she were missing something.

“Alright,” she said, standing up.

“Tell me, what do you think of Draco now?”

Hermione paused and looked back at Severus. His eyes were narrowed. Almost suspicious. Her lips twitched to move before she felt ready to speak, and she pressed them together for a moment while she gathered her thoughts. She tucked a loose curl behind her ear.

“He’s lonely. And angry about something. I think he wants to be better than he is. You were right that there’s something about me that draws him in. He tries not to, but he can’t seem to help giving in when he has a chance to.”

Severus studied her, and Hermione wondered what her expression betrayed. “Don’t interpret that as loyalty,” he said after a moment.

“I don’t,” she said, fidgeting with the hem of her shirt. “I realise that it’s not meaningful yet. It’s not

any kind of leverage. But I'm hopeful that if I'm careful, eventually I may be able to capitalise on it. Emotionally—he's vulnerable. There's no one he can trust. I don't think he has anyone who cares about him at all. I think with time, he won't be able to stop himself from feeling like he needs me. He mentioned that because of the runes, when he wants things now—it's harder to dissuade himself. I think—I might be able to use that eventually."

Severus' mouth twitched, the suspicion faded from his eyes but his expression tensed. "In that case, if you manage to succeed you're as likely to destroy the Order as save it. I hope you realise by now how dangerous he is. If you superseded whatever his current ambition is in that manner—"

Severus paused for a moment. "If the Dark Lord could not leash him, I would not advise deluding yourself into thinking you can master him."

Hermione jerked slightly and she stared into the cold fireplace, tensing until her legs trembled while she struggled not to snap. Anger flared through her like an explosion.

" *You* told me to make him loyal. *You* are the one who recommended exploiting his interest," she said in a clipped voice. "Now you're calling me delusional and accusing me of endangering the Order."

"I said to *hold* his interest. You are trying to make him depend on you," Severus said, his tone suddenly icy. "The difference is profound. In some respects, the Malfoys are closer to being dragons than they are wizards. They do not share. They are obsessive about what they regard to be theirs. Do you know who Lucius needed? Narcissa. If you succeed in what you are attempting, he will never let you go. And he will not be content with being secondary to anyone or anything in your regard." Hermione's heart shuddered slightly. She could feel cold terror slide down from the nape of her neck and bleed across her trapezius muscles. She squared her shoulders, and met Severus' eyes. She took in a sharp breath.

"He already owns me," she said in a bitter voice. "'Now and after the war.' Those were the terms. Barring his death, when exactly was I ever intended to be let go? We need the intelligence. I can't hold him with half-hearted effort. It was all in for me from the moment you all agreed to sell me to him. Did you really think I was going to get to come back from it?"

Her shoulders shook slightly. "I don't know how to keep his interest without connecting with him. It's the only vulnerability he has. If you believe it to be that much of a risk you should speak to Moody because *I—don't—see—another—way* ."

Her voice was shaking and cracked repeatedly as she forced out the last words. She breathed sharply through her teeth as she tried to steady herself.

"He's a natural occlumens. And far better at it than me. There's no halfway option in the cards," she added.

Severus looked startled.

"That does change things," he said after a moment.

"Now you understand my difficulty," she said, looking down at the floor. "There isn't an option of doing something I can back out of later. If you think I'm making the wrong choice you should tell Moody now."

He said nothing.

“I’d best be going then.”

As she left Spinner’s End, she felt dazed and unsteady. It was too warm and enclosed. She needed space to breathe. She closed her eyes and apparated to the stream in Whitecroft.

She hopped down the bank and seated herself on a large boulder among the thickly growing reeds, slipping her shoes off and dipping her toes into the cold water. The sharp sensation of the water felt like clarity.

She didn’t know why she kept ending up here. She supposed it was the only place where she didn’t feel like she was hiding anything.

She stared at the flowing water, replaying Severus’ warning. She felt at a loss. All her hope from earlier in the week felt as though it had died somewhere inside her and started to decay. She pressed her hands against her eyes and fought to breathe evenly.

She couldn’t waver now. If Severus had any alternatives or objections, he could raise them with Moody. She couldn’t change tactics now that she’d finally found one that worked.

She stared down at her fallen prayer tower. She felt so… angry.

Angry with the whole world until she felt like she’d shatter from it.

She was angry at Severus for accusing her of endangering the Order; at Moody and Kingsley, for deciding to ask her to become a whore, knowing she’d feel she had no choice; at Harry and the Weasleys, for refusing to use Dark Magic and bringing the war to the point where Hermione felt she couldn’t refuse; at her parents, for being helpless and needing her to protect and give them up; and even at Minerva, for being so distraught on Hermione’s behalf that Hermione felt she had to protect Minerva from Hermione’s own grief.

Hermione had always thought that she could do anything for her friends. Anything to protect them.

Somehow all the things she had done had left her all alone until she felt as though she was dying of a broken heart.

There should be a limit. A point at which it stopped hurting at least.

But it never seemed to stop. It just kept growing and when someone fractured the facade the way Harry and Severus each had...

She didn’t know how to fix herself anymore, and no one else seemed inclined to even notice she was breaking.

She let herself cry for five minutes before using her occlumency to cram the distracting emotions into a corner of her mind. The crying made her feel light-headed and made her temples ache. She pulled a pain relief potion out of her satchel and downed it.

She closed her eyes and forced herself to stop thinking about other people. The afternoon sunshine had seeped into the stone and felt warm under her hands. The smell of the creek water and mud and the green biting scent of the reeds filled the air. After several minutes, she closed her eyes and tilted her head back to soak in the rays. She couldn’t remember when she’d last felt warm sunshine on her

face. The light from sunrise was always cold, despite its beauty.

Everything in her life was cold.

After a few minutes, she roused herself. She pulled her feet from the water and flicked the droplets away before heading back to Grimmauld Place.

*Flashback 14*

**August 2002**

That night she and Malfoy were both subdued. He didn't flinch as she cast the cleansing charm and was quiet while she was applying the analgesic and then the salve.

"Did the Weasley girl survive?" he abruptly asked as he stood up.

Hermione stared up at him startled. She tried to guess why he was asking. Did Lucius want confirmation?

He hadn't pulled his shirt back on, and he was standing so close to her she could almost feel the heat from his body as he looked down at her. His eyes were stormy, and when she stayed silent, his expression flickered briefly.

"I'll assume she did then," he said, stepping away and putting on his shirt.

Hermione blinked. "She did. Although not for a lack of effort on your father's part," she said in a bitter tone.

Draco's expression hardened slightly.

"I'd hope you wouldn't consider me responsible for my father's actions. Surely I've committed sufficient sins on my own," he said in tight voice as he rapidly buttoned his shirt.

"I just don't know why you're asking," she said. She felt too drained to have the current conversation.

"It may surprise you, Granger, but I have no particular wish to see your friends dead."

Hermione said nothing. She had no idea what kind of response to make to the comment.

"My father—," he started and then hesitated; his face became a cold mask. "Nevermind."

Hermione slumped internally. She needed to have this conversation with him. She reached out and caught his wrist. He stilled and looked back toward her, his expression closed.

"I'm sorry. The question caught me off guard. I don't fault you for what your father does. It's just—," her voice broke off briefly and her hold on his wrist tightened. "I know you never had anything but contempt for the Weasleys—but what he's doing to them is horrific."

Malfoy was silent.

"I am sorry," he said. "I doubt you'll believe me, but I don't—there is no reasoning with his vendetta."

"You disagree with him?" Hermione asked, studying his face cautiously. He used his other hand to take hold of hers and pulled his wrist free. "If I blamed them for my mother's death, I wouldn't have

asked about the Weasley girl."

"Thank you for asking," she said, glancing awkwardly around the room. "It must be difficult for you. I know you admired your father."

Draco looked distinctly uncomfortable with the direction the conversation had gone in.

"Right. Well—later, Granger," he said and apparated without another word.

Hermione stood there for several moments, reviewing the conversation before she headed back to Grimmauld Place.

When she got there, she found her room occupied by Harry and Ginny. She fidgeted in the hallway and then started up toward the uppermost floors of the house. As she passed one of the smaller rooms, she caught sight of a shock of red hair bent over a table of maps. She paused and tapped lightly on the door.

"Hey Mione," Ron said distractedly as he moved pieces across the maps and then scratched his head absentmindedly with the tip of his wand. His expression was tense.

"Got a minute?" she asked.

"Sure." He stuffed his wand into his back pocket and looked up at her. "Just reviewing what's been happening since I left. Lot of raids while we were away, you must have been busy."

He was giving her a penetrating look. Hermione dropped her eyes.

"I'm sure you see the strategy," she said quietly.

"Kingsley's using the horcruxes to keep Harry off the field," he said.

Hermione gave a short nod. "You understand why, don't you?"

Ron's expression hardened further as he shrugged and nodded.

"No good risking him in a skirmish when we need him for the final blow. Yeah. I get it. That doesn't mean I like it. And some of these—," he pulled a few scrolls over and glanced down at them. "They're pretty much suicide missions. I hadn't realized how safe Kingsley has been playing it because of Harry. Seeing what he'll do when we're gone for a few weeks—"

He broke off as he stared angrily down at the reports. "What exactly were the casualty rates while we were gone?"

Hermione opened her mouth to answer, and he cut her off.

"I don't need you to tell me. I can see the numbers right here. Fucking—fucking bloody unbelievable. If Kingsley were here, I'd punch him."

His face was growing scarlet with rage. "Ron, we can't afford to play it safe anymore," Hermione said, her stomach knotting itself as she thought about all the people whose eyes she'd drawn shut during the past several weeks, the new hospice safe house she'd helped Bill ward. "I don't think you realise how depleted our resources are. How many years do you think Harry's vault can feed an army? The hospital ward is running on fumes. Europe is getting locked under Tom's control. The only option we have left is to take risks. And we can't risk Harry."

Ron was silent. Hermione could see the muscles of his jaw working as he kept clenching and releasing it. “We need to find the horcruxes,” he finally said. Hermione let out a low, deep breath that she’d been anxiously holding and nodded.

“We do,” she said. “Tom and Harry are the linchpins. Ideologically, the Death Eaters are too diverse. It’s Tom’s power that keeps the army cohesive. If we can kill him, permanently, there should be enough infighting to give the Resistance the upper hand.”

“I guess that’s the one upside to Tom’s delusions of immortality, he isn’t bothering to groom a successor,” Ron said woodenly as he looked over another mission report. Hermione could see her signature on the bottom, verifying the injured, calculating the losses in neat, impersonal numbers. “Although I don’t doubt the Malfoys will think they’re first in line now that Bellatrix is dead. Fucking psychopaths.”

“You need to convince Harry that the horcruxes are the first priority,” she said, staring at Ron intently. “Especially now, after Ginny. I’m worried he just wants to ignore them.”

Ron’s expression grew strained.

“Yeah,” he said quietly.

Hermione hesitantly drew closer.

“Ron, I hope what I said at the meeting last night didn’t make you feel like it was your fault. You saved Ginny. I didn’t think it would be appropriate to withhold the information but I didn’t mean to hurt you by disclosing it.”

“It’s fine,” he said, expression stiff. “You made the right call.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Don’t. I don’t really want to talk about it,” he said in a shaking voice that brooked no argument.

Hermione’s eyes darted across his face, recognising the tension around his eyes, the scarlet tipping his ears while his face grew so pale his freckles stood out like drops of blood across his face.

If she pushed, he’d explode.

Hermione felt her heart sink. “Right. Well, I’ll leave you to review,” she said turning to leave.

She made her way up a flight of stairs slowly.

The number of subjects she avoided with Harry and Ron in order to not fight with them had slowly created a chasm.

Trying to stay focused. Stay on mission. All those personal issues and arguments she’d put off for another day. Assuming the war would end and they’d have a chance to deal with it all without compromising their focus and risking someone’s life.

But the war had rolled on for years.

Now they barely knew how to speak to each other at all. There was so much unspoken resentment. So many things they’d waited too long to say. Every disagreement was about a thousand more things than merely the issue at hand. The notion that they could ever go back and fix it felt

impossible.

Maybe there had been a chance before Malfoy. But now—

Hermione felt almost certain that she had crossed a line that they would never allow her to come back from. To them, the magnitude of the betrayal would permanently sever things.

Just thinking about it made it hard to breathe.

She found herself in a practice room. She went over, slotted her feet under a wardrobe used to store equipment and started doing sit-ups until her abdominal muscles felt like they had been injected with acid.

She had discovered that Draco's exercise regime was an excellent way of channeling her stress, frustration and grief. She never intended to tell him, but she wished she had started exercising years ago. The physical symptoms of stress could not be suppressed with occlumency. Funneling it all into exercise was an excellent means to burn it off.

The surge of endorphins afterward was an additional upside.

After doing so many sit-up repetitions that she could barely peel herself off the floor, she rolled over and started doing push ups. She was rubbish at them, but she was also resolved. She was determined to work her way up until she actually did as many in a row as Draco had instructed.

She was slick with sweat and felt as though she'd been struck by a full body jelly-jinx when she finished all the various repetitions. She was only doing a quarter of the quantity, but she had finally managed to work through all of different exercises.

She stumbled down the stairs and fell asleep in the window seat.

When she woke the next morning, her whole body was protesting. Every bit of her ached. She scuttled down the stairs into a bathroom and took a long shower before anyone else was up.

That night she carefully reviewed her mental checklist of what she needed for Draco's procedure. She'd bought a cheap bottle of tequila in case he decided he wanted something. She doubted he'd have ever tasted the muggle alcohol, and she'd decided that he deserved to suffer if he chose to ignore her advice about bringing his own.

While she was packing up several potions, she felt someone breach the wards on her potion closet and turned to find Harry standing awkwardly behind her.

"Hermione," he said, only meeting her eyes for a moment before dropping his gaze.

"Yes?" she said cautiously, slipping a few more vials into the pockets in her satchel.

"I—," he started and then stalled.

She glanced at her watch. She was due to meet Draco in seven minutes.

"Did Ginny send you?" she said with a faint edge to her voice. Even before Ginny and Harry had started shagging, Ginny had made it her business to force Hermione and Harry to try to patch things after they fought.

"Yeah," he said awkwardly, shoving his hands into his pockets. Hermione's jaw tightened. "Well,

you can tell her we talked. It's fine. No hard feelings. I'm sure you were just tired and looking out for your best friend," Hermione said in a dismissive tone, glancing at her watch again.

Harry said nothing, and Hermione started stepping around him to leave. He caught her arm.

"Hermione," he said firmly. "I am sorry. And not just because Gin sent me. I crossed a line. I was angry because of how upset Ron was, and I vented it at you. I questioned how you treated Ginny and Ron, even though I know your first priority is always your patients. I'm sorry for that."

Hermione paused and stared at Harry, her expression closed.

It was a apology for insulting and doubting her as a Healer. It wasn't an apology to her.

He studied her face for several seconds.

"You're—one of my best friends," he added.

Hermione felt something inside of her fade away. As though she carried a flame in her heart and it had abruptly guttered and left her in darkness.

The words were—a second thought. Something to say because he'd said it before. Because it was a thing he was supposed to say to her.

She felt her jaw tremble. She stared at him. Something showed on her face because Harry abruptly stepped forward and hugged her tightly.

She clung to him for a minute.

"Sorry. I'm really sorry," he spoke into the side of her head, his voice muffled.

She tried to collect herself. She had no time or capacity for emotions right then.

She fisted her hands and shook for a moment as she hugged him back, before forcing her mental walls back into place. There was no room for Harry inside them.

"I'm just tired. It was right for you to look out for Ron. You were right, I wasn't thinking about him when I brought it up." She pushed herself out of Harry's arms. "You're a good friend to him."

Harry stared at her carefully.

"Am I a good friend to you?" he asked.

Hermione met his eyes.

"The best," she said in a steady voice. " *Always* my best friend."

Harry's face grew relieved.

"Ginny says she wants to test run her face in a Muggle pub so a few of us are going out tonight. Pomfrey said you're not on shift tonight. Do you want to come?"

Hermione's heart rose for a beat and then sank.

"I can't," she said. "I promised one of the hospice houses I'd come tonight for checkups and inventory. I'm already late." "Oh... Alright. Just wanted to ask," Harry said.

“Have fun.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll go let Gin know.”

She nodded and watched him walk away. When he had gone, she shut the door of her potion closet and stood for a minute trying to rein in everything.

She let out several sharp puffs of breath through her nose and then kicked the baseboard until the pain in her toes grew sharp.

She couldn’t cry. She had to perform a complex healing procedure. There was no space in her head for emotions. She had no time to cry about Harry.

She pressed her lips into a hard line and tried to recentre. After a minute she managed to shove the maelstrom down. Stifling it in the back of her mind. She waited until her breathing was even. Then she walked out of Grimmauld Place, smiling and giving a quick wave to everyone heading into London.

She was four minutes late when she walked into the shack. Draco appeared a minute later.

He stared at her.

“I almost thought you were standing me up,” he said wryly.

“Someone wanted to talk. I didn’t have an excuse to rush away,” she said as she conjured a small table and began pulling supplies out of her satchel.

Malfoy watched her work in silence for a minute.

“You’re a walking hospital,” he said.

“I have to be.”

She arranged everything in the order she would need it and then summoned one of the chairs.

“It’ll be easier for you to test dexterity in a chair than on a medical table,” she said. “You should remove your shirt entirely.”

He began unbuttoning it while Hermione straightened her supplies and ran her eyes over them carefully one last time.

“There are two ways to heal incisions as deep as yours,” she said, looking up at him. “Painlessly, but the scarring of the muscle tissue can result in long term limitations to your shoulders’ mobility. Or painfully, in order to ensure the scar tissue doesn’t bind in ways that will interfere with your dexterity. I assumed you would choose the latter.”

He nodded. Watching her carefully.

“I can use pain relief charms on the incisions that I’m not healing, but I can’t use any potions that will reduce your sensations or you won’t be able to tell me if the scar tissue is forming properly. This is going to hurt.”

“I am aware,” he said in a hard voice. Hermione pulled out the tequila and set it on the table. “Alcohol helps. Assuming you don’t get totally smashed, it will help keep the pain manageable

without reducing the sensation in your shoulders to a degree that interferes with healing. This is a muggle alcohol called tequila. It was very cheap. I don't have a large alcohol budget."

She pulled out Draught of Peace. "A double dose of of Calming Draught helps too. Being tense won't help."

She handed Draco the large vial of Calming Draught and watched him take it. "Ready?" she said. She hadn't felt so nervous about a healing procedure in a long time.

He straddled the chair, and she began.

She carefully grew a section of scar tissue and then made him fully rotate, extend and stretch his shoulder. It pulled. She cast a spell to help relax the tissue but it still pulled. She had to cut part of it away and grow it again.

Bit by bit.

Blood was streaming from the other runes as the movement continuously agitated them.

She set the scar tissue for four runes before Draco finally broke down and wandlessly conjured a bottle of vintage firewhisky.

She didn't say anything, pausing while he wrenched the cork out with his teeth and then guzzled it for several seconds. Then he set it firmly beside the bottle of tequila and dropped his head down onto the back of the chair.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck," he muttered.

"Sorry," she said awkwardly, placing her hand lightly on his shoulder as she started to work again.

"Save it, Granger," he snarled. His face was pale, and he was gripping the back of the chair until his knuckles turned white.

He drank in between every rune after that.

By the time she started on his other shoulder, he was moving steadily beyond buzzed and into the early stages of drunkenness.

"Fucking hell," he groaned in a low voice. "I always said you were a complete and utter bitch. You don't have to show me."

Hermione pressed her lips firmly together, torn between offense, amusement, and sympathy.

"The bitch who heals you," she said.

He chuckled.

"Apparently."

He didn't speak again except to answer her questions about the scar tissue until she finished. She cleaned all the blood off his back.

She gently applied several analgesics and a final layer of a creamy potion to help the new tissue set properly. The scars were an angry red.

She glanced at her watch. It was well past midnight. It had taken longer than she'd expected. "Alright," she said. "I'm finished."

Malfoy sighed with relief and gulped the last of the firewhisky before shoving the second emptied bottle onto the table beside the first.

He was still for several seconds as though regaining his bearings. Then he cocked his head to the side and eyed the tequila.

"What even is this?" he said grasping it by the neck and inspecting it.

He showed almost no signs of drunkenness. His words were unslurred and his hands remained steady. Hermione had never seen anyone drink so much alcohol and remain so externally unaffected.

It was terrifying how controlled he was.

"Don't drink it. It was so cheap. You've just imbibed a hundred galleons worth of vintage alcohol. Don't top it off with that."

He wasn't inclined to listen. He unscrewed it, sniffed it and then took an inquiring sip. He spat it immediately on the floor.

"The fuck! This is varnish. Poisoning me now, Granger?"

"I was thinking of it as a punishment if you'd chosen not to believe me and didn't bring your own," Hermione said wryly. "I'm told it tastes better if consumed with salt and a lime wedge."

"Told?"

"I don't drink much, especially not out in the Muggle world," Hermione reminded him.

"You don't even know what you bought." His mouth was still twisted as though he couldn't get the taste off his tongue.

"I just went for inexpensive and high alcohol content," she said.

"I shouldn't be surprised. Your idea of getting drunk is drinking port and pretending to be a troll under a bridge," he said, chuckling faintly.

Hermione made a sour expression as she finished packing up her healing supplies. She rummaged through her bag and cursed inwardly. She'd forgotten to bring sobriety potion. She'd had it on her mental checklist, but it had slipped her mind when Harry appeared.

"Well. I'm done. Are you safe to apparate?" she asked, eying him carefully. She didn't think he possibly could be.

He appeared to be considering the question for several seconds. Tilting his head from side to side and cocking an eyebrow. "I don't believe it would be a medically advisable," he said at last.

She sighed with relief. She had no idea what she'd do if he had tried to insist that he was sober. She wondered if she'd be able to stun him if he wasn't letting her. "Right. Well, do you want me to conjure a bed for you? I'm pretty good at them," she asked.

“Eager to be off?” he said, standing and giving her a piercing look. He did not appear to be drunk at all. “Got someone waiting for you?”

The question caught her off guard. She blinked and thought of everyone else at a pub without her.

“No,” she said shaking her head.

“Neither do I,” he announced. Then with a wandless, nonverbal wave of his hand, another bottle of Ogden’s Reserved appeared. “Let’s drink.”

She stared at him. She hadn’t anticipated the evening going in this direction.

He had to be just ridiculously drunk. With the amount of firewhiskey he had imbibed, he should have been insensate.

“I don’t think that’s a very good idea,” she said, sidling toward the door.

“Come on, Granger,” he said cajolingly and stalked forward, closing in on her, bottle in hand. He was still shirtless. “The Order’s lonely little healer. Try drinking somewhere that isn’t a creekbed.”

Hermione bumped into the wall as she backed away from him. He loomed over her, and she tilted her head back in order to maintain eye contact. He smirked down at her.

“You should feel privileged. I hardly drink with anyone. I never get drunk around anyone. It’s such a terrible idea. Occlumency’s shoddy. Slowed reflexes. Terrible idea.”

“You said that,” Hermione pointed out, sliding her hand behind her back and trying to find the door knob.

“Did I...?” He blinked. “See? Somehow—when it comes to you—,“ he sighed and rested his forehead on the top of her head. Hermione stood frozen in astonishment.

His empty hand came up and he grazed her cheek lightly with his fingertips. Gliding his thumb along her cheekbone. Hermione’s breath caught in her throat.

“You inspire terrible decisions. Something about you. I can’t understand it.” He lifted his head and leaned back just enough to stare at her. “What makes you so special?”

Hermione found the doorknob and turned it, trying to pull the door open. It wouldn’t budge. She glanced down and found the toe of Draco’s shoe lodged against it. She looked up at him, and he smirked.

“Come on, Granger. Where’s your Gryffindor courage?” he said, his voice low, coming from the back of his throat so that it sounded husky. “Have a drink with me. I’ll even call you Hermione.”

She shivered at the sound of her name dripping off his lips. The clipped, to-the-point manner in which he usually spoke was gone. He was terrifyingly playful. Like a kneazle with a gnome in its claws.

She tried the door again. He seemed to be getting closer. There was barely any space between them. She could feel the heat of his bare chest on her face. His eyes were hooded but glittering as he stared down at her. Her heart rate started to steadily spike. She was on the verge of asking him to let her leave. Of telling him that he was scaring her.

She opened her mouth to say it. Then she caught herself.

She should stay.

Draco Malfoy was handing himself to her on a drunk platter.

If she had ever hoped for an in, this was it. The opportunity would never repeat itself. Even he was admitting he was making a mistake. That it was a risk.

Staying was a risk for her, a corner of her mind whispered. She shook slightly and ignored it.

She had to stay.

She tried not to be overt about her change of mind.

“I’m not afraid,” she said, jutting her chin out and pulling her hand off the doorknob.

He smirked. “Really?”

“Really,” she said taking a minuscule step toward him. There was barely space to move.

She grabbed the bottle of Ogden’s from him and appraised it. It was an eighty year old reserve label. She pulled out the cork and sniffed it.

She was a lightweight, but she doubted she could fake drinking. Draco would notice.

And she needed the courage. She had no idea what a Draco Malfoy with lowered inhibitions might do. The thought made her feel cold with terror.

She met his amused gaze as she took a swig.

One of them was on a platter. The question was merely whom.

*Flashback 15*

**August 2002**

The firewhisky burned brightly down her throat, and instantly the pounding of her heart eased slightly. The hot feeling of courage spread across her chest.

She tilted the bottle toward Draco, and he plucked it from her hand and took a swig of his own. His eyes were locked on hers until he lowered it. Then he glanced around the bare room they were in. Pulling his wand from a holster strapped to his right arm, he flicked it and conjured a loveseat.

Hermione gave him a look.

“I’m not scooting across a sofa every time we pass the bottle,” he said. Then he added in a mocking tone, “I can conjure a courting bench if you require a barrier.”

His eyes were taunting. He was still shirtless.

“Or you could have conjured some tumblers,” she retorted, giving him a pointed look. She dropped down onto the small couch and waited for him to do the same.

He leaned down, resting his hand on the back of the couch behind her shoulder and leaned over her, sliding the bottle into her hand.

“Your turn. You’ve got a lot of catching up to do,” he said in a low voice before seating himself beside her. He was much closer than he needed to be.

Hermione took another sip, and he watched her. When she tried to hand it back, he demurred and indicated that she continue.

“You’ll regret it when I start crying on you,” she said, growing suspicious once again about how drunk he was. She could already feel it starting to hit her. She’d picked at dinner and that had been hours earlier. A warm dulling sensation was beginning to creep over her.

“You didn’t cry that much,” he said, leaning back gingerly. Then, discovering that it didn’t hurt, he sunk against the back the couch with an audible sigh. “I had no idea how much I missed leaning against things.”

“Be careful for the next few days,” Hermione said between sips. “If you’re careless while they’re setting, the skin might tear, and I’ll have to redo parts. If you want—I can keep coming. If I keep treating them for a few days longer, you won’t even be able to feel them. As least—not the physical aspect of them.”

He smirked over at her and shook his head as though in disbelief. “Is there anyone you don’t feel responsible for?” he asked.

Hermione didn’t answer the question, and she took another gulp of firewhisky. Tears suddenly pricked at the corners of her eyes.

“All my friends are out drinking tonight. They invited me, but I couldn’t go,” she said abruptly. He was quiet for a moment.

“I’m sorry. We could have rescheduled,” he said.

Hermione scoffed.

“Right. I’d just leave you with lacerations in your back for an extra day so I could go drinking. It’s not as though I could even drink with them anyway. I’d probably get into some raging fight with Harry and Ron.”

She burst into tears and cried for several minutes. While she was crying, Draco plucked the bottle from her fingers and set to draining it. When her sobbing finally eased to sniffling, he chuckled.

“You know,” he said dryly, “if I ever had to interrogate you, I think I’d skip the torture and the legilimency and just pour a bottle of firewhisky down your throat.”

Hermione started laughing through her tears.

“Oh god, you’re right,” she said huffing and wiping her eyes.

He handed the bottle back to her, and she sipped it for several minutes in silence.

“Thank you, Granger,” he said quietly after a while.

The corner of her mouth curved into a small smile. “I thought you said if I drank with you that you’d call me Hermione.”

“Hermione,” he said. She looked over at him. His eyes were hooded; he was staring over at her intently.

“Yes?”

He didn’t say anything; he just kept staring at her until she started to blush. It was distracting to look back at him when he didn’t have a shirt on. Her eyes kept dropping, then lingering, and then she’d catch herself and look up and find he was still looking at her.

“I thought you said you were angrier when you were drunk,” she finally said nervously.

“I normally am,” he said. “Last time I got drunk, I warded myself in and wrecked the room.” “You don’t seem drunk,” she said. She was beginning to feel really drunk. Her head felt heavy, and she had an overwhelming desire to both laugh and cry and curl up on the couch.

“I’m not a relaxed person.”

“I’ve noticed. And you scold me,” she said severely. She felt her face make a more exaggerated expression than she’d meant to.

He laughed under his breath. “My tension doesn’t interfere with my dueling. I bet I could still beat you in a duel even now.”

“You probably could,” Hermione said with a sigh. “I’ve been exercising though. I thought I would hate it, but it’s actually nice.”

He smirked, and it was loose and crooked. Hermione blushed. “You should put a shirt on,” she

finally said, her voice jumping. “You must be cold.”

Suddenly her hand was in his, and he had pressed it against his chest. She gasped faintly with surprise and felt her heart rate begin rapidly increasing.

“Do I feel cold?” he asked in a low voice. He’d sat up and they were suddenly very, very close. So close Hermione could feel his breath against her neck. A shiver rolled down her spine.

“N-no,” she whispered, staring at her fingers splayed across his chest. She’d spent hours touching him as she treated his runes, but being face to face made the physical contact suddenly intimate. She could feel the faintest sensation of his heartbeat under her index finger. Without thinking, she stroked his skin lightly.

He breathed in sharply, and she felt the shudder of it under her hand. His hand was still over hers, but he wasn’t holding hers in place any longer. She drew her thumb across his pectoral and felt him shiver under her fingers.

Hermione felt like she were barely breathing; that if she were to inhale or exhale too sharply, something in the air would snap.

The moment—the tension between them—felt like the wings of a butterfly. Delicate. Breathtakingly fragile.

She looked up at him. His face was inches from hers. His eyes dark as he studied her face.

He was startlingly handsome.

She’d hardly let herself notice it. But somehow, drunk and feeling his heartbeat under her fingers, she saw it. The coldness of his persona had faded; his skin was warm, and his breath against her skin was warm, and he was beautiful to look at.

She couldn’t remember when she had stopped being afraid of him. “I must admit,” he said in a low voice as though it were a confession, “if anyone had told me that you’d become so lovely, I would never have come near you. I was rather blindsided when I first saw you again.”

She stared at him in confusion.

“You’re like a rose in a graveyard,” he said, and his lips curved into a bitter smile. “I wonder what you could have turned into without the war.”

“I’ve never thought about it,” she said.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” he said, voice quiet. His hand reached over and he captured a curl that had come loose from her braids. “Is your hair still the same?”

She snorted. “Yes. Mostly.”

“It’s like it’s you,” he said, twisting the curl in his fingers so that it wrapped itself around his fingertip. “Tied in place, but still the same underneath.”

Hermione stared at him for a moment, and then tears welled up in her eyes. His eyes widened.

“Oh god, Granger,” he said hastily, “don’t cry again.” ”Sorry,” she said withdrawing her hand and reaching up to wipe away the tears. She felt cold.

When she looked back up at him again, his expression was pensive.

She'd never seen him so expressive before. Everything had felt like a mask until then. With just the briefest flickers of something real coming through on occasion.

As they sat there, she almost thought she might be seeing the real him.

And he looked—

Sad.

Lonely.

Maybe even heart-broken.

"I told you I'd cry if you got me drunk," she said.

"I know. I don't mind. I just don't want to be the reason why tonight," he said, looking away from her and dropping his hand from her hair.

She gulped down another swig of firewhisky and then offered it to him. There was less than a quarter of a bottle left.

He took it and stared around the room. His expression grew bitter. The air around him abruptly grew cold. Hermione recognized the shift. It was like her with crying. Something had occurred to him. Struck him. The alcohol had thinned his occlumency walls and he couldn't stop himself from feeling it.

Quiet. Angry. As he had said.

Without thinking, she reached over and took the hand closest to her. His left hand.

He looked over at her. She turned it over in her hands and ran her thumbs across the palm. Flattening it. She could feel the barest tremors from the cruciatus still in it.

"When did you become ambidextrous?" she asked.

He met her eyes, and she could see his surprise.

"When did you guess?" he asked after a moment.

"Your holster is on your right arm, but you've always used your right hand when dueling with me," she said. "And you have the same wand calluses on both hands. I noticed it the day I first worked on the runes."

"Clever," he said.

Hermione smirked. "Only figure that out now?"

He snorted. "Humble too," he added dryly.

She drew her wand and muttered the charms as she tapped the tip across his hand. Trying to relieve the last of the tremors. "You don't have to keep healing me, Granger," he said after a moment. She felt herself blush under his gaze.

“Hermione,” she said, reminding him again. “You looked sad. I didn’tknow if you’d want a hug from me. So I thought of this. I thought healing you, at least, is something you would want.”

He was silent, and she continued massaging his hand. Running her fingers over and against his. He had long tapered fingers.

“And if I wanted something else?” he said. His voice was quiet but there was a pointed quality to the question.

Her hands stilled, and she looked up at him. It felt as though all the oxygen in the room had suddenly vanished. Her heartbeat tripled, and her chest abruptly felt hollow.

“What do you want?” she asked cautiously. She studied his face. His eyes were dark, but his expression was relaxed. Curious. His hair had fallen down over his forehead, softening his angular features. He looked young. “Will you take your hair down? I want to see it,” he said.

She blinked. “Really?” she asked, staring at him with disbelief.

He just gave a short nod.

She slowly reached up and pulled the pins out. The braids tumbled down and she pulled the ties off them and started slowly running her fingers through to unbraid each side. When she reached the top of her head, she dragged her fingers through once more and then dropped her hands into her lap.

“There. My mane.”

He stared at her for several seconds in silence. “I didn’t realize it was so long.”

“The weight makes it more manageable,” she said, glancing around; not sure where to look. She gathered the pins in her hands and pocketed them. The tip of a long curl brushed along her wrist, and she started slightly.

She wasn’t used to having her hair down anymore. She normally only unbraided it long enough to shower and then had it tied back before it was dry. She felt almost Victorian, as though having her hair loose was revealing something deeply intimate about herself.

Draco leaned forward and laced his fingers into her hair along her temple. His expression was still curious. She shivered and her breath caught as she felt him slide his fingers through it down to her waist.

“It’s softer than I expected,” he said. His eyes were fascinated. She’d never had anyone take interest in her hair. The entire interaction has moved beyond her comfort zone, and she had no idea what she was supposed to say or do.

She stared at him and realised his eyes had become somewhat dazed looking. He was really, really drunk.

Suddenly his face was even closer. Just centimeters from hers. His hand slid up her neck and tangled into the curls at the base of her skull. It was so— Vulnerable.

Intimate.

Sensual.

He wasn’t looking at her hair anymore. His eyes were on her face. On her mouth.

They were so close.

“If you don’t want me to kiss you, you should say so now,” he said.

She felt the breath from every word against her lips.

Everything felt surreal. Like a dream. Blurred and full of sensations.

She could feel the weight of her life bearing down on her; crushing her until she could barely breathe from it. Until she could barely breathe from the loneliness.

But she could also feel Draco’s hand in her hair. He was gentler than she had thought he could be. Warm to touch. Beautiful. So close she could feel him breathing.

He was looking at her like he saw her.

He was asking.

If she hadn’t spoken to Harry that evening. If she hadn’t been so drunk. If she weren’t so lonely. If the evening’s revelation hadn’t been that Draco Malfoy was actually nice when drunk, she might have done something different. But she didn’t.

She kissed him.

A real kiss.

The taste of firewhisky was on each of their lips.

As soon as her mouth touched his, Draco took control. As though she’d sprung something loose in him. His hand in her hair tightened, and he drew her toward him, pulling her onto his lap.

She rested her hands on top of his shoulders as he deepened the kiss. He used his hold on her hair to arch her neck back and slid his other hand down her throat. He slipped his fingers over her skin; along her clavicles and shoulders and the dip of her throat as though he were taking a measurement of her.

She ran a hand along his jaw and into his hair. As her palm grazed along his cheekbone he pressed his face against it for a moment.

He was so starved for touch.

He traced along her body, and she leaned into the contact like a cat. She hadn’t realised how much she longed to be touched.

That she was starved for it too.

He slid a hand along the hem of her shirt, grazing the skin of her abdomen before slowly slipping under her clothing and splaying his hand across the small of her back. Holding her against his stomach so that she had to arch her back to keep kissing him.

The kisses were unhurried. Curious. He used his hold on her hair to control the pace as he kissed her slowly. Lightly brushing his mouth against hers so that she shivered before he nipped her softly. Then the tip of his tongue flicked out against her lower lip. She gasped, and when her mouth

opened, he deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue against hers.

He tasted like ice and firewhisky and sin.

She ran her hands over his shoulders, feeling him. Hard and pale as marble, but warm. He was so warm to touch. She tangled her fingers in his hair and tugged at it softly, arching against him as he caressed her waist and she shivered. A tension was beginning to pool inside of her.

She had never—

A voice in the back of her mind cruelly reminded her she wasn't supposed to mean any of it. She jerked slightly as if the thought had physically struck her.

Draco used his hold on her hair to draw her head back and expose her neck. Leaving her lips and kissing along her jaw and the column of her throat until she whimpered and clung to him. She meant it.

She didn't know how to not mean it.

She cradled his face in her hands, and drew his mouth back to hers. Crushing her lips against his fiercely, she wrapped her arms around him. Trying to feel all of him.

Their chests were pressed against each other, and she wasn't sure if she was feeling her heartbeat or his. Perhaps they had the same tempo.

She was so tired of being alone.

She was so tired being reduced to her functions. Healer. Dark Arts Researcher. Potion Mistress. Liaison. Tool. Whore.

As though she'd become any of those things because she had wanted to.

She wanted to cry but couldn't. She just kissed Draco more fiercely, and he met it with equal fire.

His hands roamed further up her shirt, palming her breasts through her bra. He ran his thumb lightly over the tops of them so that she shuddered and arched.

She could hear him breathing as he drew away from her lips and started peppering kisses along her jaw, scraping his teeth lightly against the curving bone.

He slid a hand under her bra and grazed his thumb over her nipple. She felt it pebble under his touch and found herself aching for him. She bit her lip and keened softly as he did it again. She was clinging to his shoulders.

He shoved her bra up and squeezed her bare breast. His mouth was hot on the juncture of her neck and shoulder, and she felt him lightly sucking on her skin.

Her hand slipped over his shoulder, feeling the faint sensation of his scars. She stroked them lightly. She ran the fingers of her other hand over his chest, feeling all the dips and rises of his muscles. Memorising what he felt like. He pressed himself against her hand.

He groaned against her neck. Pleasure not pain. The vibration of the sound flooded across her chest, hotter than the burn of firewhisky.

She gasped as he continued to tease her breasts and kiss and suck along her shoulder.

She hadn't known she could feel so many things at once. That the sensations all swirled together and amalgamated in her body, growing into something that felt bigger than her.

She felt awash in sensation and emotions.

She hadn't known his hands and his breath, his lips and tongue, his hard body against hers, the brush of his hair against her skin would affect her emotionally. She'd had no idea that hearing and feeling him react to her touch and her body could affect her the most of all.

She hadn't known it was like that.

No one had told her. No one had warned her.

She hadn't known *she* could affect him. She hadn't expected that he would like her physically. He'd never seemed inclined.

Scrawny. That was what he had called her after seeing her naked, that he'd wished he'd asked for someone else.

She shook.

Another unwanted thought came to her.

She could be anyone. He was just lonely, he'd want anyone who'd touched him.

A lump welled up in her throat, and she couldn't swallow it. Her hands stilled, and she fought to breathe without crying.

Draco noticed. He raised his head from her shoulder and stared at her expression. Then he smiled bitterly, pulled his hands away, straightening her clothes as he shifted her off of his lap.

"You should go now," he said.

His voice was cold. Hard. Clipped and to the point once more.

His mask had dropped neatly back into place.

*Flashback 16*

**August 2002**

Hermione pressed her lips together as she stared over at Draco, breathing raggedly.

“I’m too drunk. I can’t apparate,” she said. “I told you, I cry. I can’t help it. I don’t know how to hold it all in when I’m drunk.”

She clamped her hands over her mouth and struggled not to burst into tears. They leaked out of her eyes and slid over her fingers.

Draco sighed.

“Why are you crying now?” he asked when she kept choking back tears.

“Because I’m lonely and I’m snogging you and you don’t even really think I’m attractive,” she admitted tearfully.

Draco looked at her for a moment and then tilted his head back and stared up at the ceiling for a full minute.

“Why do you think I was snogging you?” he finally asked in a tight voice.

The corner of Hermione’s mouth twitched, and she looked away.

“Because I’m here,” she said quietly.

“Why were you snogging me?” he asked, looking away from the ceiling to stare at her.

Hermione studied a knot in a floorboard and twisted a curl in her hands.

“Because you treat me like I’m me. My friends treat me like a colleague,” she said in a bitter tone, “Harry and I got into a fight, and then he apologised for insulting me professionally. Like that was the part that hurt me. Somehow—you make me remember that underneath everything I’ve become in this war, the person I was before still exists.”

She bit her lip as she tried not to start crying again. She snatched the bottle off the floor where it had been abandoned at some point and gulped more of the remaining firewhisky. There was less than an inch left, and she had a lingering hope that if she finished all of it, it would take her to a point of inebriation beyond feeling.

Malfoy looked away from her, and then leaned back and slung his arm over his eyes. When she had finished the bottle of Ogden’s, she glanced over at him. His arm had slumped down; he was asleep.

She stared at him for a long time, studying his features in a way she had never permitted herself to in the past. Then, gradually, she found her eyelids closing. She should—she couldn't quite think, but she should do something. Get up? Or perhaps conjure a cot somewhere? Her sight grew dim. She

fell asleep still staring at him.

She didn't know which of them moved but when they stirred the next morning, they were half entwined with each other. Somehow neither of them had fallen off the small couch. They'd slumped down, and burrowed into each other's arms. If Hermione's head hadn't felt on the verge of cracking open, she would have tried to rapidly remove herself, but instead she just lay trapped under Draco in a state of stunned horror.

His expression showed similar horror and almost-panic when he went from asleep to abruptly awake. He tried to pull his arm out from under her, and they wobbled precariously on the edge of the couch.

"If you make me fall off this couch, I will vomit on you," Hermione immediately told him. He stilled, and they stared at each other.

"Any ingenious solutions then, know-it-all?" he finally asked.

"Give me a minute," Hermione said, flushing deep scarlet and closing her eyes as she tried to think of a solution. She was resolutely ignoring Draco lying on top of her. Draco, who was shirtless. The air in the room was cold but his skin was warm, and his breath ghosting against her cheek was hot. His whole body was hard and pressed snugly against her; his arm under her back making her arch into him. There was something distinct and growing pressed into her thigh near her hip and after a moment's bewilderment, she felt it twitch faintly—oh god!

She wasn't thinking about it. She hadn't noticed anything. She was thinking only of her hangover and how to disentangle herself from Draco without either of them vomiting on the other person.

Draco was on top of her with all his weight, but his arm closest to the edge of the couch was wrapped around her waist up past his elbow. When he tried to move it out from under her, their combined weight risked destabilising them to the point of toppling them both off the loveseat.

If he could get his other arm free, he could grab the back of the couch and free himself. But when he tried to move his shoulder, it also resulted in wobbling.

If he could move his legs off the couch first, then he could kneel on the floor and easily get free. But the process, Hermione suspected, would result in a great deal of waist-level friction.

"I think if I move my left leg—," Draco started to say.

"Don't!" Hermione barked, feeling her face grow redder.

"Fuck! Granger, don't shout," he said angrily, wincing.

"Just—let me think," Hermione said, wishing bitterly that she'd had fallen asleep on the floor.

"Fucking unbelievable," he muttered under his breath. Irritation kindled inside of her chest alongside her embarrassment over their current predicament.

"Don't blame me. I wanted to go home last night. You're the one who blocked the door and demanded I drink with you," Hermione said in a sharp tone.

"I was drunk. Per your suggestion as a supposed medical professional, I might add." His expression was disdainful.

“I apologise for recommending a source of pain relief while healing you,” Hermione said, glaring up at him. ”If my help is such an inconvenience to you, you can always go elsewhere.” “I already intended to,” he said coldly.

Hermione’s breath caught with sharp hurt, and she stiffened and then bucked under him sharply. He lost his balance and toppled, and she sat up quickly to avoid being taken with him.

He hit his head with a resounding crack on the wood floor.

“You are a fucking bitch,” he said as he gripped his face.

Hermione sneered down at him as she stood up.

“Yes, I think that’s pretty well established now,” she said, pressing her lips into hard line as she snatched up her satchel and pulled the door open.

“If you have any useful information, leave a scroll. I’ll pick it up later,” she said, stepping through and apparating before he could say anything in reply.

The moment she reappeared down the street from Number 13 Grimmauld Place, she proceeded to double over and vomit into a hedge. After she’d banished the mess and wiped her mouth, she rummaged through her satchel and pulled out the vial of hangover relief potion she had remembered to pack for Draco the night before.

She swallowed the potion, and her mouth twisted slightly as she stood in the empty street and tried not to cry as she reviewed the previous night from a perspective of sobriety.

She’d kissed Draco Malfoy. More than kissed him. Snogged him. Willingly.

She’d never kissed anyone else but Viktor Krum during fourth year.

But that wasn’t what bothered her.

As she stood in the empty street, twisting the strap of her satchel, she feared she’d compromised her mission. Draco had handed himself to her. He’d asked for her company, and he’d wanted to kiss her. She had blown it by being drunk and vulnerable and insecure. She wasn’t sure whether having sex with him would have been the right move, but she hadn’t derailed their snogging session with any calculation or strategy on her part. She’d baulked, and he’d seen it.

Willing. He’d been specific about that. The moment she’d hesitated, he’d shoved her back beyond his walls.

She hadn’t even been thinking about her mission. He’d touched her hair and told her she was lovely. He had seemed sad for her, and it had made her *want* to kiss him.

If the alcohol hadn’t made her so insecure, she probably would have had sex with him. She hadn’t known that being touched by someone could feel meaningful like that. That hearing him groan and react to her touch would affect something deep inside of her.

Theoretically she understood sex and romantic relationships. But practically—personally—speaking, she found herself so beyond her depth she felt as though she’d been dropped down into a deep sea chasm.

There had never been time nor opportunity for any kind of relationship. Not when she'd been training abroad. Not when she came back. Most people her age didn't even have clearance to access her when she was working on research or potions, and visiting was carefully regulated in the hospital. By the time most patients were recovered enough to notice her, they were transferred out of her hospital to a convalescent ward or hospice house.

There simply had never been the time.

She had watched Ron and his cycle of partners and assumed that sex was impersonal. Just something comforting and physical. That it was easy to be with someone and then walk away and not care if they proceeded to find someone else the next day.

She'd thought, that if the step was ever taken with Malfoy, she'd be able to be indifferent. That it wouldn't have to be personal if she were simply rational enough. Lie back and think of England. Women had done that for hundreds of years.

She had been wrong.

Kissing Draco and being touched by him had felt like the most personal thing that had ever happened to her. It had awakened a longing somewhere deep inside of her; as she stood alone in the street, she found herself wishing to re-experience it.

It had felt sacred. It hadn't been something strategic or impersonal. It had been her reaching out and kissing someone who was interested in her. Who had felt kindred in loneliness. Someone who understood the dark world she had descended into. Who wasn't angry at her for wanting to win the war at any cost.

She wanted it to mean as much to him. The knowledge that it probably didn't fractured something inside of her. He was probably like Ron. It was probably just something physical. The fact that it wouldn't—couldn't—be that way for her felt cruelly unjust. The fact that she still craved it anyway felt the worst of all.

She felt empty. She felt physically and emotionally betrayed by herself.

She never wanted to go near Draco again. She felt like seeing him would hurt every time.

Death Eater. Murderer. Spy. Target. Tool.

Yet she wanted him to touch her. To lace his fingers in her hair, slide his hands along her body, and feel him gasp against her lips as she kissed him back.

She'd never wanted such a thing before, and she didn't know how to ignore it now that it existed. She didn't know how to make it stop. It wasn't a longing in her mind that she could occlude.

It was somewhere deeper.

But it didn't matter. It didn't matter if she never wanted to see him again. It didn't matter how she felt. It had never mattered how she felt. The instructions remained the same: hold his interest, make him loyal.

She swallowed down the bitter aftertaste of the potion and her vomit and headed back to Grimmauld Place.

“Bloody hell, Hermione!” Ron said as she walked in the door. He was in the sitting room with the insomniacs.

She stared at him, puzzled.

“What happened to your hair?” he asked.

She reached up and felt it all tangled around her.

“Brambles,” she lied promptly.

“You look like you lost a fight with a kneazle,” Ron said in a teasing tone.

Hermione nodded absently.

“I’d forgotten it was like that,” Ron added after staring at her for another minute. “It’s pretty, the way you keep it braided now.”

Hermione smiled wanly at him and felt her jaw tremble faintly.

“Yes. It’s best when I keep it back,” she said. “I hardly know what to do with it when it’s like this now.”

She didn’t want to talk to anyone. She especially didn’t want to talk about her hair. She hurried up the stairs to a bathroom and took a shower. She scrubbed herself violently, trying to wash away any physical memory of Draco’s hands. The water was scalding, and she couldn’t bring herself to turn it off. When she was done washing, she continued to stand there as the minutes rolled by; wasting time she didn’t have.

She wasn’t crying, she told herself. It was just the spray of the shower. It was just water on her face.

She barely toweled her hair off at all before quickly braiding it into two taut French braids which she coiled at the nape of her neck. Neat. Not a stray curl to be seen.

She was taking a potion inventory when Kingsley found her.

“Granger, you’re needed at Shell Cottage,” he said.

Hermione froze for a moment before turning and drawing a rune in a very nondescript chest lying on the floor. It popped open, and she pulled out a small leather bag. She lifted the flap and took a rapid visual inventory.

“I’m ready,” she said, trying to quell the rapid beat of her heart and the cold knotting sensation in her stomach.

Kingsley led her through Grimmauld Place and then apparated from the front door.

They did not reappear at Shell Cottage. Hermione had known they would not.

They stood at the opening of a narrow cave. Kingsley went over and tapped on a large boulder beside the cave opening.

The ground at Hermione’s feet swirled and a staircase descending into the ground appeared. She stared down it for a moment, pressing her lips together before starting down.

At the bottom of the stairs stood Gabrielle Delacour looking ethereally beautiful. "'Ermione, I 'ave caught another!" she announced in triumph. "'E is not marked but I think 'e is important because 'e is being very difficult."

Gabrielle had been a recent recruit to the British Resistance. One of the few members of the French Resistance who escaped into other parts of Europe when Voldemort had finally seized control of France. Gabrielle's friends and classmates had all died. She had arrived burning for revenge.

Rather than formally induct her into the British Resistance or the Order, Kingsley had swept Gabrielle into his secret reconnaissance team; a team even most of the members of the Order were largely ignorant of.

Kingsley's recruits were scattered across Europe gathering intelligence. They were mostly free agents. Kingsley left them with vague directions and great deal of leeway regarding what means they should use to extract the information. So long as the information was good he made no move to rein in or question their methods. They were supposed to bring back their targets to be imprisoned. Hermione was called in to heal them before they were placed in suspended animation.

Gabrielle was exceptionally talented at information gathering. She used her veela allure and entrapped her targets somewhere she could interrogate them however she pleased. She also tended to bring back far more information than prisoners.

Hermione suspected she killed most of her targets once she was done with them. There was a cold triumph in the French girl's eyes that spoke of pain both given and received. The beautiful young woman always wore long sleeves and covered herself carefully from the neck down.

When Gabrielle did bring someone back, it meant she hadn't been able to break them. In which case she resigned herself to leaving them to Kingsley and Moody's traditional interrogation methods: legilimency, veritaserum, and psychological pressure.

Whenever Kingsley brought Hermione to the beach, she was never quite sure what would be waiting for her.

She braced herself.

She swung the door open and found a young man restrained in a chair. Small pools of blood sat on the floor beneath him.

Hermione took a deep breath, placed her leather bag on the table and opened it, pulling supplies out and laying them neatly across the table. When she had everything in place, she stepped closer and cast a diagnostic.

Nothing severe. Nothing that could kill him. Lots of small injuries in areas with a large quantity of nerves. They were concentrated on his hands and—Hermione swallowed— genitalia.

He was conscious but ignoring Hermione, which was normal.

Hermione's job was to heal him before Kingsley interrogated him. It wasn't a courtesy so much as an added screw to twist in while the prisoner fretted over what was to come.

Occasionally the dread was enough that they snapped while she was working and started offering their information to Hermione. The first time Hermione had been brought in and discovered that the

Order was tacitly permitting torture, she had been enraged. There was a difference, a profound difference, between using Dark Arts in self-defense and torturing someone. Agreeing to heal those prisoners meant she was enabling it.

Kingsley was unmoved by her conscience. There was no one else with clearance within the Order who had the skills to do it. If Hermione wouldn't heal them, the prisoners would be left in whatever condition they were in when he dosed them with Draught of Living Death, leaving them maimed in suspended animation. She had tried repeatedly to dissuade Kingsley from giving his recruits such free rein. She offered to brew more veritaserum. He had stared at her and replied that the reconnaissance members didn't want veritaserum, they wanted revenge. By recruiting them, he was simply channeling it as efficiently as he could. The Order needed spies who were willing to do whatever it took; they couldn't send in people who might baulk or hold back at a crucial moment.

He reminded her that they needed the information, and that what happened to the Resistance members caught by Death Eaters was worse. As though Hermione needed to be reminded; she was the one who had healed what was left of those prisoners.

But she felt like a monster each time she was brought in to heal someone caught by the reconnaissance team, wondering whether she was enabling future victims by cooperating.

Even if they were Death Eaters, wanting them dead on a battlefield was different from letting them be tortured.

"I'm going to fix your hands first," she said softly to the man.

She knelt down beside him then lightly placed her hand under his right hand and lifted it into the light.

With a quick spell she aerosolised an analgesic potion and guided the mist around the fingers and thumb. There had been needles driven under the nail beds repeatedly.

When the skin had absorbed the potion, she lightly took the hand in hers and began performing the spells to repair the tissue damage.

She had worked across three fingers when he spoke.

"I know you," he said, raising his head.

She glanced up. He looked vaguely familiar. Solidly built. Dark haired with thick stubble. His arms and hands were hairy.

"You're Potter's Mudblood bitch," he said.

Hermione raised an eyebrow and continued onto the next finger.

"You certainly grew up," he said with a leer. "I would never have thought a frizzhead like you would have ended up looking like that."

Hermione ignored him.

"Granger, isn't it? I'll have to tell everyone I saw you. We thought you were dead." He leaned forward until his face was unnervingly close to Hermione's.

“I’m going to tell you a secret, Mudblood,” he muttered. “You’re going to lose this war. And when you do, I’m going to kill the blonde bitch out there so slowly she’ll beg me for it.” Hermione continued to ignore him as she closed the razor fine lacerations that had been cut into his palms.

She finished with his first hand and then started on the second. She dreaded the thought of finishing, but eventually there was no more work left to do on his hands, and she could avoid it no longer.

“I’ll need you to sit back, if you want me to heal what has been done to your genitals,” she forced herself to say steadily.

Her whole body felt cold. Her stomach twisted so painfully she wondered if she’d ever be able to digest food again.

He leaned back in the chair he was restrained in and opened his knees. His expression was taunting, as though he was the one in power.

She wanted to stun him.

She was supposed to leave them conscious when she healed them. It was part of the psychology that Kingsley employed.

She flicked her wand to perform an unbuttoning charm then reached out and opened his trousers.

Gabrielle had used some type of fine blade to carve words into the shaft of his penis. Hermione couldn’t read the French through the ragged incisions and blood. She had a brief moment of gratitude that they weren’t runes.

Then she got to work.

She was determined to try not to touch him which made the wand work more elaborate. She banished the blood and cast a mild cleansing charm.

The young man moaned in pain for the first time. Then she siphoned out essence of murtlap from a vial and applied it magically. It was less precise and gentle but Hermione refused to let herself care.

Hermione murmured the necessary healing charms and cast a second diagnostic. He had a lot of alcohol in his system. It was probably part of how Gabrielle had gotten close. Hermione pulled out a sobriety potion and poured it down his throat. He recognised the potion because he didn’t struggle the way she expected him to.

Then she stepped back and appraised him.

He stared up at her as she reached into her bag and pulled out a hangover relief potion and offered it to him.

After he swallowed it, he sneered at her. “Patching me up for round two?” he guessed. “And here I thought you were all bleeding hearts with a no-kill policy.”

Hermione gave him a thin smile she had learned from Malfoy.

“We’re not going to kill you.” Then she turned on her heel and walked out. As the door shut behind her, she stood for a moment collecting herself.

She felt like a fucking bitch.

She had lied to Malfoy the first time she'd been drunk; she had no shreds of decency left. The war had ripped them all away.

The only thing she had left was her determination to save Ron and Harry. To win the war.

She would climb over tortured bodies, sell herself, and tear out Draco Malfoy's heart if it was required to achieve it.

When her friends were safe, she would stand quietly beside Kingsley and Moody, and swallow her damnation without a murmur.

*Flashback 17*

**August 2002**

Hermione sat on a rock on the beach while she waited for Kingsley to call her back to administer the Draught of Living Death. As she sat, she kept replaying the previous night over and over, looking for anything she might have missed.

She had concluded upon further review of the night that Draco was attracted to her at some level. Afterall, he had called her lovely, compared her to a rose in a graveyard, and claimed he was blindsided. She snorted faintly and wondered if he would ever have admitted such a thing if he hadn't been on his third bottle of firewhisky.

He lacked intimacy in his life. Whether or not she met his general standards for physical appeal, he was emotionally vulnerable to her.

She had also determined that it was probably for the best that they hadn't had sex.

His current interest was like a kindling flame; too much fuel and she'd smother it. Now that it seemed undeniable that she had his attention, she'd have to move cautiously. The key would lie in carefully cultivating it into something uncontrollable for him; something he couldn't stop himself from wanting more than anything else.

It would take time.

Draco was patient. He was willing to lie and manipulate and murder and climb as far as necessary to get what he wanted. The revenge—atonement, or whatever his alliance with the Order was based on—was something he was willing to wait to get; he'd suffer and sacrifice for as long as it took.

To try to direct his ambition and insidiously obsessive nature toward herself was a terrifying risk. As Severus has said, she was as likely to destroy the Order as save it.

She could feel herself panicking at the thought. Her chest tightened, and it felt as though the ocean wind was stealing her breath. She dropped her head between her knees and forced herself to inhale slowly.

She could do it. She could do it because she had to do it. Because there was no other way to win the war.

The very notion of being able to control him had felt delusional and theoretical up until then.

The idea that she could buy the war with her—emotional intimacy had seemed fundamentally absurd until she felt herself dipped into the deep undercurrent of Malfoy's unrestrained attention. He was so controlled, even when drunk. Even when he had kissed her. He hadn't rushed or been over-eager. His passion hadn't been explosive. It was a smoldering fire; the kind that grew secretly, like a ground fire deep in the earth, spreading and waiting before rising up, destroying the world above. She suspected he burned for things more deeply than even he was aware of.

She laid out her campaign carefully in her mind.

He would be more careful the next time he saw her. He would probably try to force her away and recreate the distance. Perhaps that would play to Hermione's advantage.

After all, there was no greater temptation than the forbidden fruit. The more he was thinking about her; about being careful around her, about how he shouldn't have her, the more she'd consume him. The more he'd want her.

The fact that she wanted him back…

Hermione swallowed and nibbled nervously on her thumbnail.

She would use that too. If the tension was real on both sides, it would make it harder for him to resist. She didn't know how to fake it anyway. She was too inexperienced. The sense of longing she felt would be included in her repertoire.

She smiled bitterly to herself.

She'd prostitute her soul to win the war. Using her feelings as currency should be even easier.

Should be...

Somehow rationalising things didn't always stop them from hurting.

The sharp sound of crunching rocks caught her attention. She turned and found Bill approaching.

"Kingsley sent me to find you; he's finished," Bill said.

Hermione stared up at him. The war had aged the oldest Weasley boy. The jaunty, cool Curse Breaker had been ground down into a hard and pensive looking man.

Bill had been the one on a mission with Arthur when Arthur had been cursed. The guilt had smothered something in him. He was cold and reliable and mechanical in his work, and his work was all he did. Hermione consulted with him sometimes over curse research. There was never any small-talk; no jokes, or off-handed remarks. Even Severus was more conversant.

Hermione stood and followed him. As they walked down the beach, Bill abruptly stopped and looked at her.

Hermione waited.

"Gabrielle—," Bill started and then hesitated. "Fleur's worried." Hermione didn't say anything. She had no idea what she could say about the girl.

"What exactly is she doing?" Bill asked.

"She intercepts messengers that Tom sends to other parts of Europe," Hermione said carefully.

"I know that. But how?"

"She hasn't told me," Hermione said. "You'd have to ask her or Kingsley."

"I think she's fucking them," Bill said abruptly. His entire face seemed carved from stone. "I think she fucks them and then when they're asleep she ties them up and tortures them."

Hermione pressed her lips together and didn't say anything. "I don't know," Hermione finally said after a long pause. "I only heal the targets brought in. I'm not informed about methods."

Bill clenched his jaw visibly. "A lot of healing?"

Hermione shifted and brushed at her nose.

"Nothing permanent," she said quietly.

He stood silent for a moment before turning to continue on. Hermione followed him back to the staircase on the beach.

The prisoner was still under the heavy influence of veritaserum when she entered the room. He was slumped down in the chair with his head lolling to the side.

Hermione walked over and cast a diagnostic charm on him.

"We're going to win—going to win. You're gonna die. All of you are gonna die…" he was mumbling under his breath.

Hermione examined the diagnostic and found that Kingsley had administered some kind of hallucinogenic along with the truth potion. She looked over sharply at the desk where Kingsley was writing down notes.

"The chemical reaction of those potions can cause permanent mania and obsessive behavior," she said in rebuke. "You should have consulted with me."

Kingsley glanced up at her.

"I consulted with our *other* Potion master," he said calmly. "Interrogation is not your specialty. This one knew occlumency. He required additional measures."

Hermione bit her tongue and turned back to the prisoner. His brain showed signs of extreme inflammation. She cursed under her breath and rummaged through her bag for something that might neutralise the effects. It was an unusual reaction; without her full potion supply closet she had limited options for counteracting it.

A tincture of distilled billywig sting slime combined with a drop of syrup of hellebore would have a cooling effect on the brain, she concluded. She amalgamated them quickly in a vial and then tilted the prisoner's head back to administer it.

His eyes were rolled back in his head, and when she touched the vial the to his lips, he squeezed his eyes and mouth closed.

"Come on now," Hermione said gently. "This will help your head."

He cracked an eye open to peer at her for a moment before opening both. She watched as his pupils suddenly dilated, and his gaze fastened on her intently.

"I remember you," he said, "you're Potter's bitch."

"You need to take this or you're going to risk brain damage," Hermione said, unfazed.

He parted his lips and downed the tincture and then hissed and shook his head slightly. Hermione

recast a diagnostic and watched the inflammation rapidly fade away.

She looked back at his face and saw that his pupils had contracted into tiny dots in the center of his irises. His gaze was still fastened on Hermione in a way that grew quickly unnerving.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Cold...my brain feels cold. My brain is cold, but the sight of you is warming the rest of me right up,” he said in a vaguely singsong tone.

He suddenly lunged forward, and his teeth snapped closed on air as Hermione stepped quickly back. He laughed.

“What do you think you are, a werewolf?” she said sharply. The question was rhetorical; diagnostic readings would indicate lycanthropy.

He snickered. His expression was still dazed with veritaserum, but his eyes remained fastened on Hermione.

“I’m not a werewolf. But I’m going to remember you,” he said. “When you lose this war, I’m going to remember you. I’m going to kill that blonde bitch, but I think I’ll ask the Dark Lord if I can have you. He might want to keep you alive. I’ll keep you alive.”

His eyes crawled over Hermione, and she shivered. She was coming to regret healing the brain inflammation. Something about the rapid way she’d counteracted the hallucinogenic appeared to have locked the obsessive tendency she’d worried about directly upon herself.

“That’s enough, Montague!” Kingsley said sharply, standing up and walking over. Hermione glanced over, finally recognizing the prisoner. He’d been a few years above her at Hogwarts. Graham Montague.

“We have everything we needed from him,” Kingsley said, gathering up several rolls of parchment. “You can put him under.”

Hermione nodded and stunned Montague. His eyes were still fastened on her face as he slumped back.

As she finished prepping him for stasis, she consoled herself that even if the Order lost the war, it was unlikely that the cave would be discovered. She would never see him again.

When the Draught of Living Death was administered, Hermione handed Montague over to Bill and then headed back to Grimmauld Place.

Draco had left no scroll of information when Hermione returned to the shack that evening. She stood there for several minutes, wondering if he’d show up to have her check the scar tissue.

After ten minutes of waiting, she left.

She wasn’t sure what it meant. It was possible there hadn’t been any new intelligence, but she couldn’t ease her fear that it was retribution for the morning. She tried not to let it stress her and reassured herself that if he’d had anything urgent, he would have mentioned it sooner.

No longer needing to heal Draco each evening made her progress feel stalled. She found herself

thinking about him often. Not strategically. She wondered about how he was, whether the scars were irritating him.

She kept reevaluating and re-analysing their snog session and its aftermath until she felt as though she were a bit mad.

The inconclusiveness of it grated on her mind. She found it difficult to focus or sleep that week.

She had given up on using her room for sleeping. Harry and Ginny regularly occupied it for the entire night. Harry slept when he was with Ginny. He could actually sleep peacefully. The effect was dramatic. His mood stabilised in a way that it hadn't in years, and Hermione rarely encountered him in the sitting room at night. The stress that had been erroding him for years seemed to ease for the first time since Dumbledore's death.

Hermione took to sleeping in whatever empty bed she could find or in the training rooms. She kept exercising and building her stamina up dutifully.

The next Tuesday she was so stressed she took a Calming Draught before she apparated to the shack. She had no idea what Draco might do.

When she arrived in the shack, she bounced on the balls of her feet while she stood waiting. Then she realized there was a scroll laying on the table. She stared at it for a moment before picking it up and unfurling it. Raids for the upcoming week. Counter-curses.

Nothing directed to Hermione.

—not that she'd expected him to leave her a personal note.

She sighed faintly and left.

She didn't see him for the entire month of August.

She fretted about it. The intentional silence between them gnawed at her. She kept reviewing what had happened, questioning her conclusions and drawing new ones. Maybe she'd ruined everything. Or maybe he was avoiding her because he was afraid of how she tempted him.

She kept vacillating. Was it a good sign or a bad sign?

The worst part was that she missed him. She hated to admit as much to herself, but she felt forced to acknowledge it. Treating his injury had become a significant aspect of her daily life. Interacting with him had become a significant aspect of her life. Having it so abruptly ended made her feel the absence keenly. She didn't have many people that she saw regularly.

She kept replaying all their past interactions. She kept reevaluating him and all his behavior. She was obsessing but she didn't know what else to do. She needed him for the Order.

She had to obsess over him. It was her job.

She didn't need to miss him though, she told herself firmly. That was a personal failing.

September rolled around and he continued to simply leave scrolls without appearing.

Hermione began to feel fractured. She didn't know what she was supposed to do.

It was smart of him, of course. If she were in his shoes, it would probably be what she'd do. But it didn't solve the problem of what Hermione was supposed to do about it.

She kept foraging and visiting the shack with increasingly dwindling hope.

As Malfoy had warned her, larger and larger swaths of England's countryside had anti-apparition wards dropped over them. For weeks Hermione tried to avoid the areas and forage elsewhere, but eventually the wards swallowed up all the areas she needed to forage in. She tried to find new spots, but she couldn't obtain sufficient quantities of certain crucial ingredients.

When her dittany supply ran out, she gave up and ventured into a warded forest. She cast all the detection spells she knew and stayed alert. She was harvesting her third, large bed of dittany when the forest grew unnaturally quiet. She immediately stashed her supply and turned sharply, casting new detection spells in every direction. Nothing.

She trusted her instincts. She was a good hundred feet from the edge of the anti-apparition zone. She headed for it calmly, trying not to to betray her concern. She held her silver knife in one hand and her wand in the other as she picked her way carefully through the bracken.

They waited until she was close enough to the edge of the ward to feel hopeful.

Razor sharp teeth suddenly sank into the back of her right leg. She screamed slightly and whirled to find that a gytrash had emerged from the darkness and slashed her calf open.

"Lumos!" she snapped. The ghostly dog promptly released her leg and melted back into the darkness of the forest. Hermione didn't pause to check the injury. She raised her wand and looked for more creatures. Gytrash tended to run in packs.

They also weren't typically aggressive toward adult humans.

As she was turning around warily, something abruptly dropped on her from a tree overhead. She barely had time to look up and see the pale skin and elongated fangs of a vampire before it knocked her flat. The vampire closed its hand around the wrist of her wand hand and pinned her to the ground as it sank its fangs into her shoulder.

Hermione didn't even think. She lashed out and buried the blade of her silver harvesting knife into the vampire's temple, wrenching herself free. She flung herself to her feet and bolted past the anti-apparition wards.

She reappeared and nearly collapsed in the middle of the creek in Whitecroft.

It was not an ideal place to reappear. She glanced around dazedly and wondered why on earth it had been the first place she'd thought of. She was bleeding profusely. Vampire fangs injected anticoagulant venom into the blood at first contact, and Hermione had torn her shoulder badly as she had ripped herself free. Her entire shoulder grew drenched with blood as she stood, trying to regain her bearings.

She looked down at her leg. She was bleeding badly there too.

She didn't have the energy to apparate again. A car drove by and Hermione ducked awkwardly under the bridge until it passed. She had the supplies she needed to heal herself, but she didn't particularly fancy doing it in the dark under a bridge.

She checked the time. It was more than an hour earlier than she was supposed to show up to pick up Draco's missives. She sighed. Knowing him he'd probably left it the night before anyway.

She cast a disillusioning charm on herself then pressed down hard against her shoulder to slow the bleeding as she limped to the shack. As she had guessed, the scroll was already on the table when she opened the door. She rolled her eyes and stuffed it into her satchel with her less blood-stained hand.

Hermione sat heavily in a chair and cast a diagnostic. She had bled a lot. She would start getting light-headed if she didn't staunch it quickly. She pulled a bandage out of her emergency kit and used a spell to wrap it firmly around her calf. She'd heal the Gytrash bite after she fixed her shoulder.

She arched her neck and tried to see the gashes. The movement twisted the injury; she hissed and conjured a mirror. The vampire had bitten down on the juncture of her neck and shoulder. When she'd torn herself free, the fangs had sliced long, deep lacerations over to her collarbone, barely missing her jugular vein and carotid artery.

Hermione cut off her shirt and cast a cleansing charm. Using the mirror and awkwardly working in reverse, she crushed and pummeled fresh dittany leaves in her fingers and then stuffed them into the gashes. Dittany wasn't very effective fresh, especially whole, but she didn't have a pestle on hand. She chewed on several leaves as she worked.

Holding her bunched up shirt firmly against the gashes with one hand, she set to work mixing together an infusion that could function as a coagulant. She couldn't brew a potion, but she had yarrow and murtlap essence. She combined them with a few practiced flicks of her wand and swallowed it quickly. After a minute, the bleeding in her shoulder began to ease.

She was covered in blood, and there was a decent sized puddle of it accumulated on the floor beneath her. She ignored it. She'd clean up the shack when she was done.

She used the mirror to start plucking the dittany leaves out of the gashes, then she recast a cleansing charm on the area and reappraised the injury. The upside of vampire bites was that they healed easily without causing any scarring.

She started near her clavicles where the laceration was the shallowest and began muttering the spell to knit the skin back together.

She'd made it halfway across her shoulder when Draco abruptly apparated into the room.

He appeared to blanch slightly when he saw her, and Hermione blushed and immediately wished she hadn't cut her shirt off. Then she snorted, because she was covered in blood; unless Draco had a weird fetish he probably wasn't paying any attention to what clothes she was or wasn't wearing.

"What happened?" he said after staring at her for several seconds.

"I was foraging," Hermione said blandly, refocusing on her reflection in the mirror and resuming her healing. "Sorry. I'll clean up the floor before I go." "Are you alright?" he asked.

Hermione laughed. She had gotten a lot closer to dying than she had in a long time and she was slightly faint with blood-loss and having such a question directed at her while she was dripping blood on the floor of his dilapidated building was just strangely hilarious to her.

“Well, no,” she said. “But it’s nothing I can’t fix.”

Draco grew visibly angry.

“I told you to be careful,” he finally said.

“I have been,” Hermione said, her amusement suddenly disappearing. He was the one who’d said he’d teach her to defend herself and then refused to even lay eyes on her once she finished healing him. “But as you are aware there are anti-apparition wards all over England. I ran out of dittany. It’s a critical supply for us. I cast detection charms and I tried to leave as soon as I sensed anything. But as you yourself noted, it was the benevolence of Fate that I’m alive at this point.” Her voice grew bitter, “My luck was due to run out.”

“Why not just buy it like a normal person?” he asked as though she were thick.

“Because,” Hermione said, her voice tight with a shrill and slightly mocking edge of it, “I’m a known terrorist. Perhaps you’ve forgotten. And—” she hiccupped “—I don’t—have any money left.”

He fell silent and just stood staring at her for a minute.

“What happened?” he asked again.

“I was foraging in Hampshire. The forest went quiet so I cast detection spells but nothing showed up. I decided to leave anyway though. I was almost out when I got bitten by a Gytrash, then when I was driving it off a vampire attacked me. I killed it and apparated. I don’t know why I came to Whitecroft. I didn’t mean to. But I lost too much blood to apparate again and I don’t—I used up all my Essence of Dittany. And without Dittany leaves I can’t make blood replenishing potion either. So I had to come here to fix it manually.”

Hermione’s voice was shaking as she finished speaking, and she was on the verge of tears. As she had related what had happened, it abruptly stopped being funny and started being traumatic and horrible and too close.

She started hyperventilating as she thought about how close she’d come to dying all alone in a forest. No one would have even known where to look for her, and by the time they’d thought to, she would have been long dead.

She clamped her mouth shut and hiccuped several times as she tried to breathe evenly.

“I think I’m going into shock,” she said.

Her voice sounded oddly small and childlike. She swallowed hard.

She wanted to cry, but she refused to allow herself to. She’d already cried in front of Malfoy several times. She didn’t want him to think she was someone who just cried over everything. She was so angry he was there. That of all the times he’d decided to show up, it had to be then. She wished she’d apparated anywhere else.

“I’m not dying. The Order is not in crisis. So you can just go. I’ll clean up before I leave, you won’t even know I was here,” she said.

It was not the strategic thing to say, but she didn’t want to look at him. He’d kissed her and then

called her a bitch. He'd let her spend weeks healing him and only thanked her when he was drunk and then told her he intended to go to a different healer the minute he was sober again.

He'd cut her off.

He'd made her miss him like an idiot while he'd probably gone and fucked as many high-breasted, curvaceous prostitutes as his heart desired.

She hated him. And she didn't want him to see her when she was covered in blood and hysterical and traumatised.

Why couldn't he ever leave her alone when she wanted him to?

After a minute she turned back to healing her shoulder in the mirror again. He kept standing and staring at her.

In a few minutes the gashes were closed and only faint cicatrices remained. They would fade once she had some dittany tincture to apply.

She summoned over the other chair and lifted her foot up and started unwrapping her leg. Then she cut off her jeans at the knee and dropped them alongside the remains of her shirt in the puddle of blood.

She surveyed the Gytrash bite. It was difficult to see all the punctures on the back of her calf. She shifted her hips to get a better view. Two long gashes and several punctures. She cast a cleansing charm over the area to clear the blood away. None of them were very deep. She didn't think any of it was likely to scar.

She had it all repaired in short order.

The room seemed to be rotating slowly. She sat back and closed her eyes for a minute. Then she reopened them and cast a new diagnostic charm on herself. She'd lost a little over a pint of blood, which should have been in an acceptable range of loss, but she was sufficiently underweight that it was over 15% of her blood volume.

She blinked at the diagnostic for several moments and conjured a glass of water. Her lips were tingling faintly.

She rummaged through her bag trying to see if she had any food and found a muesli bar that she had no recollection of. She gulped down the water and set to eating, stubbornly ignoring Draco's continued presence. He was still just standing and staring at her. When she finished her third glass of water and every crumb of muesli, she glanced up at him in irritation.

"I'm going to be here for a while before I'll be able to apparate," she said as she glared at him.

"Why can't you apparate?" he asked. She stared at him for a moment and then gestured at the floor.

"Blood loss. I had to walk here from the bridge. There's probably a trail, actually. As I mentioned, I was out of dittany, so I have no blood replenishing potion on hand in my emergency kit. I'll have to wait until I feel stable enough to apparate. If I stand up now, l'll probably just faint."

Draco appeared to be growing pale with rage. His jaw kept clenching and releasing the way Ron's did when he was on the verge of exploding. He kept staring at her as though he resented her mere

existence.

He'd clearly managed to get entirely over whatever passing interest he'd had in her. She'd been pining, and he'd apparently spent the last six weeks remembering that he hated her, that he'd always hated her, and that her Mudblood existence in the world was an offense to him.

He *was* a far better occlumens than she was.

She'd have to admit to Moody that she'd misstepped and blown her assignment.

Her lip trembled, and she looked away and started cleaning the blood off the floor with practiced ease. The staining wouldn't come out of her shirt so she banished it rather than trying to repair it.

She glanced up and discovered that Malfoy had apparated away without a sound. Her mouth twisted. She hadn't known he could apparate silently.

She found herself simultaneously relieved and devastated that he'd actually left. She shook her head sharply and only let herself sob once, very softly, before she turned back to cleaning the floor.

While she was rummaging through her satchel for something to transfigure into a shirt, he abruptly reappeared.

"Blood replenishing potion," he said in a cold voice as he handed a vial to her.

She stared down at it. She recognized Severus' spiky handwriting in the label. She unstoppered it and swallowed the contents.

The room immediately stopped moving, and her lips stopped tingling.

"Thank you," she said. She transfigured a piece of cloth into a white t-shirt and, after scourgifying her shoulder, arm, and torso, pulled it over her head. Then she gathered all her supplies back into her kit and stood to leave.

"See?" she said, gesturing at the floor. "I was never here."

He didn't say a word as she walked out the door.

*Flashback 18*

**September 2002**

When Hermione returned to the shack the following week, there was no scroll on the table.

There was also no table and no chairs. The little bit of furniture that had been there before was gone.

Her stomach dropped, and she felt the doorknob rattle in her hand.

She kept staring, willing a scroll to appear. She looked around the rest of the room. Perhaps she'd overlooked something.

The furniture was gone.

She walked slowly into the room and glanced around.

Maybe he was just busy. Maybe he'd bring it in the evening, she thought nervously.

But the furniture was gone.

Maybe he'd been injured or killed. It hadn't even occurred to her until just then; he might die and she wouldn't even know. He'd just disappear, and she'd never see him again.

Surely Severus would let her know if Draco died...

Besides, the furniture was gone.

She stood in the middle of the room, wondering what to do.

Surely he wouldn't end his arrangement with the Order just because she'd bled on his second-hand furniture. He'd had his back carved into ribbons to be a spy. Trailing blood into his safehouse could not possibly be his limit.

Perhaps he'd just burned the furniture.

She turned around one last time and then started for the door. She'd come back in the evening. If there was nothing by the next week, then she'd let herself panic. She wasn't going to let herself panic yet. There might be some other explanation.

She was halfway out the door when she heard a pop. She turned and found Malfoy standing in the center of the room.

She stared at him, wide-eyed and uncertain. He looked her up and down, as though he expected her to be injured again.

"We should resume training," he said after a moment. Hermione said nothing. She felt torn between a desire to laugh or cry. The corner of her mouth twitched, and she tried to swallow past a hard lump in her throat. Her hand shook faintly as she fought to hold in all the furious things she wanted to say.

*I've been here every week. You're the one who stopped coming. I didn't even want to drink that night. You made me stay and then punished me for it. Why do you even care? Why are you here? Why are you spying for us? Why can't you make sense so I can stop wondering if you're redeemable or not? I was here. I was here and you were the one who never came back.*

She didn't say anything. She just stood in the doorway.

She wanted to just turn and leave. To go and try to make sense of why she cared.

She cared. She felt betrayed.

He'd given her dire warnings, ordered her to work out, practice dueling, and be careful. He'd made her paranoid and stressed every time she ventured out to forage for potion ingredients until she could hardly breathe when she was out; until she couldn't even eat the night before because the food tasted like ash, and her stomach knotted so tightly with anxiety that she couldn't force it down.

He'd made her realise how much she didn't want to die.

She didn't want to die.

He'd told her he'd train her, ridiculed her for not being ruthless enough, and then— abandoned her.

He didn't abandon the Order.

He'd only abandoned her.

Which should have been fine. It should have been fine with her. It was always only supposed to be about the Order. But it had hurt. Every week he hadn't shown up had felt like being abandoned all over again.

Was she just that easy to leave behind?

Her chest stuttered, and her cheekbones ached from the effort it took not to cry.

She didn't do anything; didn't say anything. She just stared at him wide-eyed and kept swallowing until she stopped feeling like she might burst into tears.

"Alright," she said. "Today? Or is this just a heads up for next week."

"Today," he said. "Unless you have other commitments this morning."

She did not have other commitments. She had time. With Padma slowly taking over more and more of Hermione's work, Hermione rarely had other commitments. Unless Kingsley needed her, or there was a serious injury, she was completely at Malfoy's disposal. She suspected he knew that.

She was a Dark Arts Healer and curse specialist. She had a Potions Mastery. She had left behind and eventually given up all her friends to become those things; to become an asset in the war effort.

But the contribution the Order most needed from her, was for her to mould herself into a femme fatale capable of emotionally manipulating Draco Malfoy into depending on her; to try to take advantage of his lack of intimacy until she owned him.

Sometimes it made her so angry she thought she'd die from it.

It was all Malfoy's fault. He'd asked for her. He'd done this to them both, but she was currently the

only one paying for it.

There were moments when she resented him so much it felt like her heart might beat itself into dust within her chest.

She stepped back inside the shack and closed the door.

“When you escaped the vampire, how did you do it?” he asked after a moment.

“It had my wand arm pinned, so I stabbed it through the temple with my silver harvesting knife,” she said shrugging, trying not to look at him.

It hurt—to look at him.

He nodded, his eyes never leaving her. “Do you usually have a knife on you?”

“Well, it’s for harvesting, so yes, it’s usually in my satchel.”

“You should wear it. You keep your wand in a holster on your arm, don’t you?” His gaze dropped down and ran up and down her body as though he were cataloguing her.

“Well, sometimes,” she said, crossing her arms across her chest, uncomfortable under the attention. “It’s almost eleven inches long. My forearms aren’t that long. Wearing it restricts my arm movement. I either lose my wrist mobility or I can’t bend my elbow.”

She drew her wand from the pocket in her jacket and held it next to her forearm to demonstrate.

Draco scowled and rolled his jaw.

“That’s problematic. Where do you keep it?”

“If I have a jacket I keep it in an inner-pocket. If I don’t then I have it in my satchel or in my pocket.”

“That’s not fast enough. If you’re attacked you won’t be able to draw it in time. You should at least have a knife. Your clothing is shielded now, isn’t it?” “It is,” Hermione said immediately. “Everything I wear when I’m foraging has shield charms applied to them.”

George and others in the hospice safe-houses who still had hands steady enough to do spellwork spent most of their time weaving shield spells into spare clothing for the Resistance fighters.

“Do you prefer cloaks or jackets?” he asked after a moment, his tone almost suspiciously casual.

Hermione’s eyes narrowed.

“Cloaks blend in better in the Wizarding world. A jacket on a woman tends to signal that she’s Muggle-born,” she said.

“Alright, then,” he said, drawing his wand from his wrist but then switching it into his right hand. “Let’s see if you’ve improved since last time.”

Hermione put down her satchel and warded it before entering dueling pose.

She’d improved dramatically since they’d last practiced when he’d been injured. She’d exercised to the point that her stamina was decent, and both Kingsley and Moody had drilled her several times.

She was also angry enough that she *wanted* to hex Draco. He actually moved to avoid several of her hexes and she blocked most of the water he sent at her. Finally he stopped.

“You’ve gotten better,” he said.

“I don’t want to die,” she said with a shrug. Her voice was only slightly bitter.

“Good,” he said with a sharp nod. He stashed his wand and reached into his robes. He pulled out a scroll and then a flagon that Hermione immediately recognized as being filled with Essence of Dittany.

She gasped and held out her hands without thinking. Essence of Dittany required such vast quantities of Dittany leaves it was rare that she had any of it. They’d gotten a supply of it when the Order had raided the curse division, but she’d used most of it healing prisoners. What was left she’d used to neutralise the venom in his runes.

She hadn’t been able to afford to buy or produce more after that. A single drop required a bushel of leaves. She usually made her Dittany into powder or tinctures instead. The efficacy was lower, but her foraging supplies lasted longer that way; stretched to heal more people.

“Don’t go into Hampshire again,” he said. “There are hundreds of vampires there. You were lucky to have survived.”

She hesitantly accepted the flagon. “Is this going to expose you?” she asked, running her hands over the glass longingly. “This is a suspicious quantity. An individual couldn’t use this much in a lifetime.”

He smirked dismissively. “I’m a General in the Dark Lord’s armies, I can ask for anything I want. Those who question it tend to find their tongues missing.”

Hermione blanched and Draco rolled his eyes.

“I’m being facetious, Granger. I have never cut out anyone’s tongue. Suffice to say, I’m not going to do anything that risks blowing my cover just because of you.” He sneered at her as he shoved the scroll of information into her hands.

“Keep practicing.” He vanished soundlessly.

Hermione stared at the empty space for several minutes before she left.

When she got back to Grimmauld, she surreptitiously divvied the Essence of Dittany into dozens of tiny vials and hid them carefully. Most Order members were too ignorant about potions to notice or wonder if Hermione suddenly had an endless supply of it, but Padma would know. They’d been trying to invent ways to stretch their meager supply of Dittany for weeks.

Malfoy was quiet and surly when he trained her. He ignored her questions and only spoke to scold her angrily when she did something wrong.

She would have almost thought he hated her, except every time she walked in the door he instantly appeared and looked as though he were bracing himself to find her injured; his eyes ran over her from head to toe as though to reassure himself.

The dueling sessions kept getting longer and longer. Hermione pretended not to notice.

Several weeks later Malfoy pulled out a shielded cloak. She looked it over carefully.

“All my clothing is already shielded.” She held her cloak in front of herself and found that it was perfectly sized for her height.

“This is shielded with manticore blood.”

She looked over at him sharply. “Does that mean you killed it?”

“No. It’s surprisingly difficult to come up with a good excuse for killing them. But it seems that mine is strangely lethargic, McNair cannot understand why,” he said with a smirk.

“You’re bleeding it,” Hermione said, looking at the cloak again.

He nodded. “They don’t do well in cold climates. Perhaps it will come to an unfortunate end this winter. If I’m lucky it will mature enough to produce venom before succumbing to the cold.” “I hope you’re not torturing it,” Hermione said, eyeing him. “It’s sentient. And even if it weren’t, every living thing should be treated humanely.”

“I am not torturing it. Although describing it as sentient just because it can speak is highly generous,” Draco said with a faint sneer. “All it does is croon about how it wants to eat me alive.”

“If you were keeping me prisoner and draining me of my magical abilities I’d croon similarly,” Hermione said.

Draco laughed mirthlessly.

“Thank you, for the cloak,” Hermione said after she looked it over carefully. It was beautifully made. It had temperature regulating charms woven into it so she could wear it all year round and it was lined with dozens of undetectably expanded pockets for her to stash things inside. The hem was charmed not to be tripped on. Even without the manticore blood protection, the cloak had to be worth a small fortune in craftsmanship.

“Consider it my thanks for healing my back,” he said without looking at her.

She looked over at him and he stared determinedly out the window. “Are they—,” she hesitated. “Did the scar tissue set properly? I—you—you never came—when I came to check on them.”

“They’re fine,” he said in a stiff voice. “Physically, I can barely feel them. I had no need for further attention.”

His jaw was rolling slightly, rippling as he clenched it. Hermione stared at him for a moment before dropping her eyes back down to the cloak.

“Well, that’s good,” she said. “I—hadn’t ever done the procedure to that extent before. I was worried—”

“Don’t be! I have no need for the concern of someone like you.”

Hermione stared at him wide-eyed. He balled his hands into fists as he stared at her.

“I just meant—,”she started. “Just back off, Granger,” he said in hard voice. He wrenched a scroll out of his robes and dropped it onto the ground before vanishing.

Hermione picked up the scroll thoughtfully, tapping her chin after she stashed everything in her satchel.

She left the shack and walked toward the creek deep in thought.

What had he said about the influence of the runes? " *They don't countermand my own behavior, but it's as though new elements have been written in. It's easier to be ruthless. Somewhat harder to dissuade myself from impulses. Not that I had much distracting me before, but now, everything else feels even less consequential."*

She had the runic vow memorised, she'd spent so many evenings staring at it. Unhesitating, cunning, unfailing, ruthless, and unyielding; driven to succeed….

But *what* he was driven to succeed in was unstated; left to his discretion.

He wanted her.

She was almost certain of it. He was currently torn between his determination to push her away and a desire to have her.

That was why he had been so enraged that she had been injured.

He couldn't dissuade himself to the point of not caring if she died, but he was determined not to give into wanting her and compromising himself. The Malfoys were possessive like dragons, Severus had said.

He knew what she was doing; what she had been sent to do. She could see it in the resentful way he stared at her. There was a vicious rage in his eyes that hadn't been there before.

But he'd become cornered by the realization that she would likely die if he didn't train her. The vampire attack had been remarkably good luck. If she'd tried to stage it it couldn't have come out better.

If she kept him near her, it was only a matter of time before he'd finally slip; he'd want her too much to keep holding back. The runes would assure it.

When that happened…

Hermione sighed.

When that happened she'd own him.

Unless he was so desperate to free himself of his obsession that he killed her.

In some moments, when she felt his eyes on her as they were dueling, it felt like a coin toss between the two. As though he were constantly weighing the options.

Confident as she had become in his attention, she wasn't confident enough to say whether she would survive it. There was so much about Draco Malfoy that she did not know or understand. When she looked at him, she could only wonder whether he was the type of person who destroyed the things he loved. Whatever it was he wanted—his motive for spying—he'd killed countless people already to try obtaining it. If he thought she was in the way...she might be next. *Unhesitating, cunning, unfailing, ruthless, and unyielding; driven to succeed….*

Hermione twisted the strap of her satchel as she stood thinking.

She needed to prioritise training Padma during any spare time she had.

Padma had a decent aptitude for healing, she stayed calm under pressure and had a good head for memorising all the spells and variations. She did have trouble with the precision needed in certain healing wand-work, and she tended to rely on rote memorisation rather than embracing the creativity necessary for inventing counter-curses. But Hermione hoped that, with Poppy's help, Padma would be able to replace Hermione sufficiently.

Hermione had started taking Padma foraging with her. Someone else needed to know how to gather the local potion supplies; with winter approaching they needed to try to stock up. But Hermione was careful not to let Draco know she had a foraging partner. If he found out, he'd probably stop training her.

She foraged with Padma on Thursday mornings. Tuesdays she still went alone, but more cautiously.

Hermione needed to have everything in place before she tried to progress things further with Draco.

She watched the water sliding beneath the bridge and wondered if she was stalling.

She didn't want to die.

The past few weeks she'd found herself thinking about dying almost as much as she thought about Draco.

After feeling the vampire's fangs sinking into her shoulder, she was abruptly confronted with the fact that on primal level she had an absolute determination not to die. She hadn't realised how overwhelming the drive was.

Rationally she had always regarded dying as something she could face. For a good reason, she would gladly die.

But the instant she felt the terror of hands pinning her to the ground and teeth sinking into her flesh, the instinct to fight her way free and kill anything that got in the way had swallowed her mind. She hadn't realised how her survival instinct would superseded everything.

She hadn't realised how much she didn't want to die.

But if it came down to her and Draco, she probably would die. He could kill her so easily. Another corpse for his body count. She'd probably bleed together with all the rest of his dead after a while.

She smiled bitterly to herself as she thought about the contrast between them.

Hermione's body count was a representation of her failures. Everyone she hadn't saved. Draco's body count was an illustration of his achievement. Everything he was and why he was valuable to both Voldemort and the Order.

Their relationship—whatever it was and wherever it was headed—felt like some cruel form of irony. It was as though they were the reverse of each other.

Yin and yang. They circled inexorably.

Somehow the war had tied them together

She apparated back to Grimmauld Place and went to find Kingsley.

Generally she spoke solely to Moody, but Alastor was in Ireland training new recruits with Remus and Tonks.

Kingsley was standing in the war room, staring at a map on the wall. Hermione knew he was aware of her presence, but he didn't immediately acknowledge her.

"Kingsley," Hermione said as she closed the door softly, "could I have a word?"

He turned with a sharp pivot, his robes fluttering around him and cast several privacy wards on the room before he spoke.

"Granger," he said, "new information?"

Hermione unbuckled her satchel and handed the scroll to him. Kingsley unfurled it and ran his eyes across it for a minute before stashing it inside his robes and looking at Hermione again.

"Do you need to speak with me about something, Granger?"

Hermione stared at him for a moment. Ever since Draco had demanded her, Kingsley had stopped using her first name. She had noticed. He referred to Harry and Ron and most of the other members of the Order by their first names, but he always used her surname to address her. To impersonalise her to himself, she had concluded.

"I think Severus has spoken to you and Moody, about his concerns regarding Malfoy," she said.

Kingsley nodded, his expression betraying nothing. "Yes, we've spoken."

Hermione nodded. "The way things are going… I'm beginning to think there's at least a chance Malfoy may kill me."

Kingsley looked at her squarely and straightened his robes. "Are you asking for us to pull you out, Granger?"

Hermione looked away and stared at a still life painting on the wall. "No. We need the information. We'd probably all be dead by now if not for Malfoy. I just—I want to know what I should prioritise while I'm training Padma to replace me. She doesn't have two years like I did, and there is still too much basic healing she needs to learn before I can teach her advanced Dark Arts healing. And then there's potions and foraging. I'm just not sure—She's not as driven as I was. I know she wanted to stay in the field with Parvati. So I need to know what you and Moody regard as the highest priorities."

Kingsley was silent for a minute.

"I'll speak with Alastor and look over the hospital's reports. Perhaps make a list of what areas we have no redundancy in. I'll have an answer next week." "Alright," Hermione said, nodding. Her voice sounded stilted and mechanical.

"Granger. Tell me, what exactly is the strategy you're trying to employ?"

She looked back over at Kingsley and felt tired.

"He wants me. He's obsessive, and he wants me. But he knows what I'm doing. I can tell, by the

way he looks at me, that he knows. I still don't know what his long term goals are. He doesn't ever say anything that gives it away. If I keep drawing him in, and it turns out I interfere with his original ambition, he may resort to killing me. But, if he doesn't kill me— according to Severus the Malfoys tend toward being both obsessive and possessive. I don't think he'll abandon the Order at that point. Willingness seems critical, and he knows that mine is conditional on the Order's survival. "

Then she shrugged. "Or I could be wrong and he'll turn on the Order, which is what Severus fears. I honestly don't know. This is not—I don't know how to use people like this."

Kingsley was silent.

"If he's growing obsessed with you—That's more than I had expected," he said, glancing over at the table and resting his fingers on the edge and tapping thoughtfully.

Hermione felt as though she should have some kind of reaction to the words; offense or satisfaction or—something. But she felt nothing. It was as though her heart were slowly compacting inside of her chest, growing smaller and harder day by day.

"I'm not—," she started and then paused and pressed her lips together. She twisted her head slightly as she felt tension in her neck begin radiating down her shoulders. "I'm not lying to him, Kingsley. I'm not being insincere. The emotional connection between us is real."

Kingsley's fingers stilled, and he studied her with slightly narrowed eyes. "I hope you're not becoming compromised by him, Granger. The Order is depending on you to stay on mission."

Hermione nodded stiffly. "My loyalty will always be to the Order first."

Kingsley's expression did not ease. "Harry—you know I can only keep him away from the worst fights if I know which ones they'll be." Hermione flinched. "I know. I'm doing everything I can, Kingsley. I am doing the very, very best that I can. I'm not—I'd never do anything that would risk Harry."

"Keep it up then," Kingsley said, turning back to the map on the wall.

Hermione stared at his back for several moments before she turned and rested her hand of the doorknob; as she gripped it, she laughed quietly.

"Something else you want to say, Granger?" Kingsley's voice had a slight edge to it.

Hermione glanced over her shoulder. His back was still to her.

"I was just realising," she said in a low voice, "If I succeed—you'll use me to control Malfoy the same way you're able to use Harry to control me. It—it almost makes me feel sorry for him."

Kingsley was silent for a moment. "Well, he'll deserve it considerably more than you do."

*Flashback 19*

**October 2002**

The next time Hermione arrived at the shack, Draco appeared looking visibly annoyed and carrying a gramophone.

She eyed him carefully. “I think I’m missing something.”

“Rest assured, Granger, if I could devise a better solution I would have.” He conjured a table and put the gramophone on it. He flicked his wand, and the music began playing.

“Is this—,” Hermione choked faintly and stared at him incredulous. “Are you wanting us to dance?”

“Waltz.” He turned to stare at her. “You move like a penguin when you duel.”

Hermione felt her cheeks grow hot.

“I most certainly do not,” she snapped.

“I’ve spent considerably more time watching you duel than you have, and believe me, you do.” His lip curled derisively. “You're slow and awkward and the only reason I don’t hit you more is because I’m intentionally not aiming.”

Hermione bit back a retort.

“So you think the solution is waltzing?” she said stiffly.

“I do. Aunt Bella was one of the most exceptional dancers I have ever had the misfortune of being partnered with. She dueled with equal fluidity. I know you can dance. We just need to transfer the movement to dueling.”

Hermione thought about it for a moment, and then nodded as she put her satchel aside. “Alright.”

Draco walked toward her with the expression of a someone who would rather be punched in the face than do what he was about to do.

He raised his left hand for her to take. Then he set his jaw rigidly and slid his right hand under her arm, placing it below her shoulder blade before pulling her closer until there were only a few inches between them. Hermione felt as though she were barely breathing.

She stared up at his face as she rested her left hand on the top of his arm near his shoulder. They stood in position, not moving, just staring at one another. She could see the tension in his jaw and the hard line of his mouth as he almost, but not quite, sneered down at her. She could also see his eyes and, as she met them with her own, she could see his irises bloom until he abruptly jerked his chin up and stared across the room.

She felt his fingers flinch against her back before he stilled them.

“So.” His voice was hard as he stared away. “The dance that best represents the speed and fluidity that I want you to develop is the Viennese Waltz. It’s an extremely easy step to learn, if the female is responsive and capable of following another person’s lead. Given that neither of those things are qualities anyone would apply to you, I’ve resigned myself that it’s going to take a considerable amount of time before you manage it with so much as a semblance of grace.”

He gave her a condescending smile.

Hermione felt her indignation and determination begin rising in her chest and she stiffened slightly before it occurred to her: Draco clearly did not want to be ‘holding’ her in his arms; he was trying to provoke her into striving hard and ending their “dance lessons” as soon as possible.

She gave him a thin smile of her own.

“I’ll do my best,” she said and shuffled slightly and “nearly” stepped on his toes.

“Then please don’t tread on me.” He sneered down at her. “I would prefer not to go to a healer because your clumsiness ends up fracturing a bone.”

“I’ll heal it for you,” she said with mock sweetness.

He sneered at her again and abruptly started to move. Hermione tried to follow but their knees collided. She yelped and he swore.

“Some warning before you start moving,” she said in a tight voice as her right knee throbbed.

“Try following my lead,” he snapped. “This is for dueling. No one is going to give you ‘some warning’ before they curse you. You need to have the instinct to just move.”

Hermione’s jaw tightened and she huffed.

“Fine.”

“We’ll start again.”

Hermione didn’t need to pretend to be clumsy when dancing with Draco. The speed at which he expected her to waltz at was nearly breakneck. He was not patient. In fact, he seemed determined to make it as unpleasant as he possibly could; probably to motivate her.

Her toes were throbbing, and she was fairly certain his dragonhide boots were steel reinforced in the toes because he accidentally kicked her in the shin, and she thought he might have fractured something.

She dropped to the ground with a howl and hugged her leg.

“You are the worst dance instructor on the planet,” she snarled and jerked her trousers up to find a purple bruise already blooming across her shin.

“However shall I live?” he said dryly, without even looking down at her. “My secret ambition is crushed.”

“Are you trying to break my leg? Why are you wearing combat boots?” she said in a furious voice.

Malfoy glanced over sharply and caught sight of her leg. His expression wavered for a split second

before he regained his mask of indifference. “I didn’t expect you to be this clumsy,” he said.

“You are a complete bastard,” Hermione said as she summoned her satchel and rummaged for her healing kit. “Yet most of your precious Order would be dead by now if it weren’t for me.” Draco sneered viciously at her. “By now I’m as much their savior as Saint Potter will ever be, and I own you, so you really have very little room to complain.”

Hermione felt herself pale as she felt fury ripple through her chest. She hated him. She hated him. She hated him and she still wanted him, and that made her hate him even more.

But she possibly hated him most because he was right about the Order. The war in Britain was at a stalemate currently, after years of slow losses on their side. The Order was still, comparatively speaking, steeply disadvantaged, but Voldemort had had fewer and fewer victories since Malfoy had begun spying. Draco’s aid had tipped the scales of the war into a balance, and he knew it.

He held the Order in the palm of his hand.

It was the most tenuous form of survival possible because they had no idea if he might someday just let go.

“I’m trying,” she said in a shaking voice as she spread bruise paste across her skin. “If you had given me some warning, I would have gotten a book and practiced the steps before I came. It’s not like I’m intentionally not trying. I don’t know them. You could try communicating a bit more.”

He glared at her for several moments before looking away. “Well, now you know. So practice.”

He vanished with an angry crack.

Hermione stayed behind. She pulled her shoes off in order to check her toes for fractures and mull over what an unbelievable arse Draco was. She sighed and buried her face in her hands.

The worst part was that she didn’t really blame him. If someone were doing to Hermione what she currently was doing to Draco, and apparently succeeding, she would be hard pressed not to resent and want to hurt them too. It must be eating at him to know she was manipulating him emotionally and still feel drawn to her. It was a viciously cruel thing to do to someone.

Especially him.

Everything she learned about him made her feel more guilty about it. She swallowed her guilt. Draco Malfoy was a double-edged weapon, just as poised to cut down the Order as to aid it. Unless she leashed him, he was a threat.

It wasn’t as though she was enjoying it. Surely he must know that too.

She wasn’t lying. She wasn’t being insincere. That was why it was working. Having him know her motive didn’t negate the genuine connection they’d somehow forged. That was why it was so awful. It was real, but she was weaponising it.

She left the shack and apparated to a bookstore to find a book that explained how to Viennese waltz.

The next week Draco was equally surly, but he had the courtesy to wear different shoes. When Hermione arrived, she sat down in front of him and proceeded to transfigure her foraging trainers into a pair of low heels.

“Planning on wearing heels when dueling too?” he asked, raising an eyebrow as he stared down at her. His lip curled condescendingly. “The book I read said I’m supposed to be on my toes. It’s easier to get used to the step and fluidity if my feet are already in the right position. I’ll switch back to trainers again once you think I have a semblance of grace,” she said, lifting her chin.

“You need better shoes. Those Muggle things you wear are useless,” he said with a sneer.

Hermione flushed. Most of her clothing came from muggle donation bins. Good shoes in her size were difficult to find. She’d been maintaining her current pair with reparos.

Draco Rich Wanker Malfoy probably didn’t even know how much a pair of dragonhide boots cost.

“They work,” she said in a tight voice. “That’s all I care about.

She stood up.

“If you don’t mind, if you start more slowly and then pick up speed, I think I’ll be able to follow better,” she said.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Fine.”

He didn’t even look down at her as he held out his hands and she stepped into them and into position. She was ready when he stepped forward without warning. She drew her right foot back and did a short, quick step as she allowed herself to be pivoted on one foot and he then took a long step back, and she followed him with her left foot.

It was, as he had said, an extremely easy step technically. The difficulty was the speed and trusting Draco’s lead; forcing herself to relax enough to follow him instinctively rather than reactively. Following him wasn’t difficult in theory; he’d clearly been taught to dance. He had a excellent carriage and frame and moved with the fluidity of a cat. Unfortunately, he was also an arse who was intentionally trying to make dancing with him as unpleasant as possible, while she was trying to adapt to a new step that involved them rotating as a couple in clockwise circles and moving counterclockwise around the room.

He stepped on her toes eight times within twenty minutes, and Hermione rather thought several of the times had been intentional.

“For heaven's sake, Draco!” Hermione kicked him sharply in the shin after he crushed her right foot particularly painfully. “We’ll spend considerably less time dancing together if you’ll just give me a chance to get used to the step. It will take longer if you break my toes.”

“Is there anything you know how to do but complain?” he said with a sneer as she bent down to look at the injured appendage.

”I don’t know. Is there?” she said coldly, standing up and squaring her shoulders. She met his eyes as she lifted her arms into waltz position before he could.

His expression flickered and he baulked momentarily. She smirked tauntingly at him, and his expression grew briefly murderous as he pulled her into his arms and against his chest. She looked up at him.

“Unless there’s some reason you can’t, perhaps we could try Viennese waltzing normally,” she said

in an even but slightly needling tone. “After all, this was your idea. The sooner I master the fluidity the sooner we can get back to hexing each other.”

“A consummation devoutly to be wished,” he said with a cold expression.

He moved more slowly. Hermione was not actually a terrible dancer, just extremely out of practice and in the arms of someone physically distracting and personally spiteful.

After an hour she was able to follow him at full-speed without either of them injuring each other.

Finally he stopped.

“Good enough. Start thinking about how to use the fluidity when dueling,” he said, shoving his hair out of his face and rubbing his forehead.

“Right. I’ll just waltz around in the practice rooms, I’m sure no one will notice that,” Hermione said acerbically in between panting breaths. She was sweating and she could feel her shirt clinging to her back between her shoulders. Strands of her hair were plastered against her neck.

Malfoy looked cool as a cucumber. He probably had temperature regulating charms in all his clothing. Although he still seemed to be perspiring slightly.

Hermione tugged at her shirt to make it stop sticking to her torso and cast a cooling charm before conjuring a cup and some water. “It’s your life,” he said coolly, then he pulled out a scroll. “The Dark Lord is growing frustrated with all the rescues. He has Sussex working on something to prevent it. I don’t have much access to that building, but the Order should begin preparing for the eventuality that they may not be able to save people for much longer.”

Hermione swallowed hard.

“I didn’t realise Dolohov was so multi-talented,” she finally said.

“He’s not,” Draco said, conjuring his own glass of water. “Now that most of Europe is in hand, the Dark Lord is able to bring together quite a number of ambitious scientists with few ethical lines. You know Sussex is expanding beyond curse development. It’s remarkable the magi-scientific advancements that can be achieved when scientists can do anything they want with their test subjects.”

Hermione felt as though something inside her had collapsed and left a void. “I see...I suppose that’s hardly surprising. Similar things happened during the second muggle World War.”

Draco nodded and looked tired. More than tired; it was as though his soul were shining through his silver eyes, and he was almost transparent inside.

“How do you know about World War Two?”

His eyes glittered hard as diamonds. “As previously mentioned, I can read. Why wouldn’t I study it? It’s obviously the playbook the Dark Lord is drawing from. The propaganda runs parallel. The same tactics. He learned from Hitler’s mistakes; he’s not wasting any resources on Russia, and he’s being careful to avoid outright provoking MACUSA for as long as possible. Although, I don’t know what they intend to do if he tries to overthrow the Statute of Secrecy.”

Hermione nodded. “We’ve tried to reach out for aid, but apparently genocide isn’t enough of a

reason to intervene. Other countries need to sort out their own problems, you know; MACUSA isn't the world's aurors. They won't even take our refugees. Not without at least a few years to vet them. Even the children. Apparently there's too much risk of bringing Europe's extremism to their soil, and we don't have any legal records for most of the youngest ones..."

Her voice trailed off. She looked up at him seriously. "Do you think we can win, Draco?"

She wanted to hear the answer from him more than she wanted to hear it from anyone else. Ron, Harry, Fred, even Kingsley or Moody… they'd all lie, or choose to take an optimistic view of things. But Draco Malfoy would not lie about it. For some reason she felt certain of it. He would tell her what he really thought was possible.

He sighed and leaned against the wall. "Does it matter what I think?"

"I live among idealists, but all I see are more and more bodies. I want to hear from someone who actually knows what it's like out there and doesn't believe that optimism somehow improves the odds." "You're well aware that I think your Order is largely moronic." His expression was bitter. "Although I have noticed that Shacklebolt and Moody do make the occasional strategic choice when they can get away with it."

He gave Hermione a pointed look, which she returned without blinking.

"I don't see how you'll win with the continued policy against using the Dark Arts. Then again, Potter is an idiot who is still alive. He has the most unnatural talent for survival I've ever seen; power too, if he were willing to actually use it. If it comes down to a duel between the Dark Lord and Potter, I'd give the Order one in four odds, on the basis of Potter's continuously improbable luck. But if the war is about more than that—" he rubbed his forehead. "the odds are considerably longer. To put it mildly."

"Why aid us then?"

He quirked an eyebrow, and his expression became reserved and mocking. "Don't you think you're worth it?"

"Oh yes, your rose in a graveyard." She glanced away, snorting faintly, and straightened her clothes. "Get those runes for me?"

His eyes flashed for a moment, and then he shook his head.

"Why then?" she asked as she studied him.

He stared at her and his expression flickered. He looked bitter. Wounded. His eyes were calculating for several seconds as he looked at her, then his expression became closed again.

"It doesn't matter."

Hermione started to open her mouth. She wanted to argue, to point out that it did matter; that if he would stop being enigmatic she wouldn't be forced to manipulate him. But she couldn't say that, and he already knew. Whatever his motive, he didn't trust the Order not to use it against him.

They both knew the Order would.

"I suppose not." She sighed and then sat down to transfigure her shoes. She prepared to leave but

looked back at Draco when she was at the door. He was leaning against the wall, his eyes darted away from her as she turned.

“Don’t die, Draco.”

He stared at her for a moment before smiling.

“Only because you asked, Granger.” His tone dripped with sarcasm.

He was still leaning against the wall when she closed the door behind her. Their Tuesdays came to be comprised of the odd combination of dancing and dueling. Draco determinedly drilled her until she could fluidly dodge and move the way he wanted her to. He had been right; dancing and dueling involved a similar type of reactive ability and Hermione picked it up quickly.

It unnerved her slightly when she realised that her movement and techniques were indeed growing reminiscent of Bellatrix's.

She would have almost thought she was getting decent, but Malfoy never used his left hand. She wondered how he dueled when he was really trying.

He arrived with noticeable injuries sometimes but coldly refused to let her heal him.

The amount of time they spent together grew longer and longer. Dueling practice developed breaks every half hour to cool down and rehydrate. Hermione tried to talk to him, but he mostly ignored her, and when he did answer her questions, he seemed to lie.

Occasionally Hermione got called away abruptly following a skirmish, but Death Eaters weren’t prone toward early morning attacks.

The tension of the war felt endlessly strung out, as though the fragile balance would snap at any moment. The tension between Hermione and Draco felt similar.

By December she felt as though the very air between them vibrated when they were together. Angry. Resentful. Desperate.

There was an edge developing to him; as though he were eroding slightly from stress. She wasn’t sure whether it was simply the stress of war or if she were contributing to it.

He arrived one day looking pale, with blood dripping from his left hand. He’d nearly bitten her head off the last time she tried to heal him, so Hermione attempted to ignore it. When it failed to stop bleeding after half an hour, she finally spun around him as she dodged a hex and cast a diagnostic charm on him. She stared at it for less than a second.

“You idiot!” She was forced to retreat across the floor and throw herself into a somersault in order to avoid the angry, rapid succession of stunners he sent after her. “You can’t ignore vampire bites.”

She shot half a dozen tripping jinxes at his feet and while he was avoiding them, she whipped her wand up and managed to catch him in the forehead with a stunner.

He dropped and she stared in astonishment, half expecting him to suddenly sit up. She was shocked she had actually managed to strike him. Then it occurred to her that the success probably had more to do with his blood loss than her dueling talents. She hurriedly cast another diagnostic on him. He had lost a concerning amount of blood. He had been bitten somewhere on his upper arm, had

internal bleeding and an open wound on his side. She conjured a bed and levitated him onto it. She only hesitated for a moment before she sat down on the edge beside him. Even unconscious, Draco looked tense. She reached out tentatively and touched his cheek. Then she brushed her fingertip between his eyes, trying to banish the stress from his expression.

She cast a spell to unbutton his robes and shirt and then, with a practiced partial-levitation charm, she pulled him up so that he was leaning against her and pushed all the clothing down off his shoulders and arms. His head dropped against her shoulder, and she couldn't help but notice the scarring from the runes. They had set well into silver scars across his shoulders. She ran her fingers lightly over them and felt the magic; cold and implacable. Carved into his being. The magic shivered faintly under her touch.

His skin was worryingly cool.

She eased him back down onto the bed and looked him over. He'd gotten bitten on his bicep, two deep punctures which were easily healed. The more serious issue was his torso which was mottled with deep bruising which Hermione suspected were from a close range Expulso hex, possibly from a skirmish with the Order that had occurred the night before. He had a gash on his side that looked to be several days old but had started bleeding again due to the vampire bite.

She summoned her satchel and pulled out her kit. She poured several potions down his throat and then set to repairing the injury in his side.

He was an idiot, and she felt cold with worry to realise he wasn't getting his injuries attended to. In the past he'd been in excellent physical condition when she'd healed him.

He had numerous scars on his arms and torso that hadn't been there before. She could tell by studying them that he had just ignored them and left them to heal on their own rather than going to a healer.

Perhaps he'd fired his previous healer after they had offered no relief for the runes. Even if the magic was obscure, no qualified healer could have been so ignorant as to pretend there were no options unless they'd been willfully negligent.

He'd *said* he had a new healer. Whenever she'd offered to heal him he'd insisted he had someone who would take care of it.

He was being intentionally careless.

Perhaps he was doing it to punish himself. If she was making him waver from his— atonement, or whatever it was. Hermione bit her lip. Perhaps he was intentionally neglecting his physical well-being in order to focus himself. Or—possibly, he was trying to test his limits.

She tried to not to dwell on that possibility.

She pulled out a bruise paste and spread it across his torso and then muttered charms over all his scars to help them heal and fade somewhat. She cast another diagnostic and studied it carefully to make sure she hadn't overlooked any injuries.

Once she was sure there was nothing else to tend to she took his hand, entwined her fingers with his and then pressed the back of his hand against her cheek. Waiting as his skin slowly started to warm as the blood replenishing potion took affect.

She brushed his hair off his face and stared at him, tracing along his features with her eyes and watching colour slowly come back.

When he was undeniably warm she withdrew her hands away and cast cleaning charms on his clothing and redressed him. His robes had a taint of Dark Magic in them, as though it had become woven into the fabric.

She wavered over whether she should stay where she was or go across the room before rennervating him.

She stayed.

She'd barely finished speaking the spell before he sprang up, grabbed her by the throat, and slammed her down onto the mattress before she could even scream with surprise. His hand stayed on her neck, and she could feel several of her hairpins stabbing into her skull as he pinned her down. His eyes were disoriented, but his expression was enraged. Their faces were mere centimeters apart.

She watched his expression ripple as he recognized her and realised he was on the verge of strangling her. His hold immediately loosened.

"What the fuck, Granger?" He glanced around them and looked more confused as he realised they were in a bed together.

She stared up at him, her heart pounding. It hadn't even occurred to her that he might attack her like that. "You were hurt."

He jerked his hand away from her neck and his expression grew furious. "I nearly killed you. You meddling—"

She interrupted him. "It's possible you are somehow unaware, despite the fact that I have specifically told you, but vampire venom is an anticoagulant. You had some minor internal damage from the skirmish last night. You were bleeding to death inside and out."

"I would have had it taken care of in due time," he said, but his eyes didn't meet hers; they were lower, on her neck. His hand slid forward and she felt his thumb brush along her throat.

She shivered faintly and felt her skin prickle as his fingers ran along her neck. "Really? Just who was going to heal you? Because I must say, based on all the new scars littering your body, I think that the new healer you keep mentioning is a fraud."

His hand stilled. "You removed my clothes?" "Just your shirt. Don't look so astonished, I'm a healer, Draco. It's not as though it's the first time I've seen you shirtless."

His eyes flashed with rage. "Do not heal me without permission." His voice was a low growl.

His fury was overt, but the intimidation of it was ruined by the fact he was simultaneously turning her head gently, checking to see if he'd bruised her at all.

Hermione felt the corner of her mouth quirk slightly as she watched him. He was leaning over her, his fingers pressing along her jaw as he kept turning her head from side to side and running his thumbs lightly across her skin. Her heart was beating harder than it had when he'd abruptly pinned her down.

“Try not to be dying in my presence and I won’t feel like I have to. I don’t want you training me when you’re hurt. You already know that.” Her hand went up and closed around his wrist to still him. His eyes flicked up and met her own, and she studied him seriously. “Get a healer, Draco. A good one. Put them on retainer, and call them when you’re hurt. Please. Please get a healer.”

He just stared at her, and it felt like her heart stalled from the intensity. Her pulse thrummed under his fingers and she watched as his pupils slowly expanded, swallowing the silver of his irises. The heat of his skin was bleeding into her, and she could feel his breath against her face.

His face drew infinitesimally closer. Her heart was beating so hard she wondered if he could hear it. Her breath caught, and her fingers tightened around his wrist. Everything was warm, and they were so close. He was so close.

He dipped his head lower, until their lips were almost touching. Then he laughed.

He jerked his hand free of hers and sat up. His expression was cold as ice, and he sneered down at her.

“Did you really think I’d kiss you?”

Hermione stared at him.

He tilted his head back and chuckled bitterly. “You know, it amazes me that someone like you has managed to stay friends with Potter and Weasley for so long.”

Hermione flinched. “Someone like me?”

He stared down at her and quirked an eyebrow, his expression was impassive, but she could see the resentment in his eyes. ”Someone with no lines they won’t cross. With Potter and Weasley’s righteousness, I would have expected it to end things for you by now.”

Hermione stared at him and her mouth twitched. She pressed her lips together hard. He smirked and cocked his head slightly. “What? Did you think I was referring to your blood?” She dropped her eyes. Yes, she’d go with that. No good would come from admitting that he was right; her ruthlessness had essentially ended her friendship with Harry and Ron.

She sat up and reached back to adjust the pins holding her braids. “You were the first person who ever called me Mudblood.”

Draco shook his head in faint disbelief. “Surely you at least know this war isn’t about blood purity.”

“I know that it isn’t.” She jutted her chin up. “But most of the Wizarding world doesn’t appear to have noticed that.”

He straightened his robes and shrugged. His mask was dropped back into place; his expression was indolent and aristocratic. Hermione stared at him, trying to absorb the profound contradiction that was Draco Malfoy. Assassin. Order Spy. Pureblood heir. Muggle philosophy and history hobbyist. Death Eater General.

The more she knew of him, the less she understood him. He leaned against the headboard of the bed and eyed her. “War requires easy extremes. Otherness. When I say my name is Malfoy, I immediately contextualise myself within history. The Malfoy name has nearly a thousand years of

traceable history in England. People know who my parents are, my grandparents, and my great-grandparents. We have entire history books and hallways of sentient portraits to carry and maintain the legacy. But you— your family history is as muddied as a creekbed. No one knows who your parents are or what kinds of genetic disease you may carry or what your magical potential may or may not be."

He tilted his head to the side and ran his eyes over her from head to toe as though he were appraising a horse.

"It's easy to be suspicious of people those you know nothing about. When something is frightening it's easy to hate. Muggle-borns with odd clothing, and electricity, and rumors of your strange weapons. Your parents are the reason the Wizarding world has been forced to live in the shadows of secrecy for hundreds of years. Yet the moment a Muggle shows a hint of magic ability, we're expected to welcome them into our world so they can violate our traditions and steal our jobs."

Hermione snorted and turned herself so that they were closer to each other once again. Draco's eyes widened for a moment before he stifled his surprise. Hermione closed the space between them and stared up at him.

"Is that why you hated me in school, Draco, because I was going to steal your job?"

*Flashback 20*

**December 2002**

Draco quirked an eyebrow as he met her eyes.

“You stole my class ranking, which was worse. I’d been tutored at home, prepared my entire life for Hogwarts. My father had my life planned for me: top of my class, prefect, Quidditch captain, Head Boy, internship at the Ministry of Magic, and eventually a member of the Wizengamot and then Minister of Magic. The ministry career he lost due to his participation in the first Wizarding war; I was supposed to do it all. But then, first year of school and an inferior little Mudblood girl managed to exceed my marks in every class.”

He reached out and laid his hand across her throat. Hermione’s breath caught slightly, and he tightened his hold, just enough to draw her face closer to his.

Draco’s eyes glittered, and his tone was almost light, as though he were daring her to flinch. “I have to admit, I really hoped you’d die during second year when the Chamber of Secrets was opened. I did actually earn my place on the Slytherin Quidditch team before my father bought brooms for the team, but thanks to your little comment the whole school assumed my father just bought my spot.” As he spoke, he slid his thumb up her throat to her jaw and then pushed against the bone to force her head back.

He was trying to force her to flinch. Hermione kept meeting his eyes. They were darkening.

The room felt warmer.

He kept talking.

“It was easy to believe that Muggles and their spawn were responsible for the problems in the world. It certainly felt that way in my life. Between half-blood Potter, whose life was an endless stream of dumb-luck and favouritism, and you, and then the impoverished Weasleys being exhibit A for what happens to blood-traitors. There wasn’t any reason not to believe the Wizarding world wouldn’t be a better place without you and your ilk.”

“I didn’t realise you thought about me that much,” Hermione said.

She could feel heat slowly radiating through her body, spreading outward from his hand, but also between her shoulders, across her skin and unfurling somewhere in her lower abdomen. She shivered faintly as she kept meeting his eyes.

His mouth twitched. “My hatred of you paled in comparison to my rivalry with Potter. You were an irritant. Despite your grades at least you were ugly, socially awkward and obviously insecure.” His lips curled into a faint smirk. “Beating me academically wouldn’t have mattered if you hadn’t been friends with Potter. He dragged you into the spotlight and needed you enough that he couldn’t deny it. If Potter hadn’t mattered, you wouldn’t have either.”

Hermione felt something in her stomach suddenly drop, thinking back to the initial suspicion she'd had; that demanding her was some kind of revenge or retaliation against Harry. She'd almost forgotten about that fear. He smiled and leaned forward so that he was looming over her as he continued to hold her by the throat and stare down at her face. Their bodies were almost touching, and she felt a renewed awareness of how much bigger he was, how much he could hurt her if he wanted to. That she was trying to break inside a sealed vault, and she didn't know if there was anything but rage on the other side.

But it didn't matter, because it was what she was supposed to do.

Her breath caught, and she trembled faintly. Draco's eyes darkened.

He pulled her even closer. Her heart was beating so hard it hurt.

It's an act, she told herself. When he was drunk, he didn't hurt her. He was trying to scare her.

His breath was hot on her face, and his voice was so low he was almost whispering to her. The timbre laced through her nerves.

"The Dark Lord doesn't actually care about blood purity, or his followers, or magic being might. You Muggle-borns just happen to be common enough to seem like a threat. It gives the Dark Lord an excuse to accumulate power and it incentivises dark beings to join his cause. He brought most of Eastern Europe into alliance that way. Romania was the first, and the rest fell in line. There are thousands of dark creatures desperate to see the Statute of Secrecy overturned and the wand ban ended. Most pureblood families are discontent with the way wizards are forced into the shadows for the comfort of Muggles. There's enough resentment—if not to recruit them to the cause—to encourage them to ignore what's happening."

Draco gave a thin smile as his face drew even nearer. "The Dark Lord wants power. He isn't particular about who he crushes underfoot to obtain it. Muggles and Muggle-borns—" she could almost feel his lips against hers, "—you… were just easy."

Hermione could barely breathe. Her whole body was taut; at the precipice of something that felt like fear. Her heart was beating rapidly. Everything around her was blurring.

She wanted to bolt; she felt scared and vulnerable. She understood human anatomy and physiology, but her body was doing things she wasn't familiar with. Her physiology wasn't supposed to be confusing. She needed space to figure it out.

But—she didn't want to go; she had never felt anything like it before. Physical touch that was comforting, she understood. But this wasn't comforting. Draco's hand around her throat wasn't comforting. It was terrifying—and thrilling. "A means to an end," she forced herself to say. "We're just a means to an end.

He pushed her back slightly. "Precisely."

She studied him. His eyes were black, and the hollows of his cheeks were faintly flushed. He slid his thumb slowly along the curve of her jaw. She licked her lips.

"Has killing us solved your problems then?" she asked.

His hand stilled. He stared at her for several seconds. Then his eyes glittered and he smiled.

“Well, you’re certainly no threat to my job now, are you?” As he said it, his free hand slid firmly between her legs.

His eyes were cold and locked on hers. His fingers twisted and pressed knowingly at the apex of her thighs. It felt as though he’d electrocuted her. Sensation shot through her nerves.

She gasped.

As she did, everything crashed down on her with a sense of cold horror.

Hermione jerked away from him.

Draco’s hands immediately withdrew from her, and he watched with an indifferent expression as she drew further away until she was on the far end of the bed.

She was shaking faintly. She could still feel him touching her; sliding his hand between her legs as he stared in her eyes and reminded her that he had turned her into his property. Not because he had wanted her. But simply because he could. Because it had amused him to do so when he made his offer. Because he had power, and she was a pawn.

Now he got to watch her try to whore herself to him, and anything else she could conceive of, in the hopes of becoming a possession he would at least be unwilling to part with. He didn’t have to debase her further. He could sit back and watch her do it to herself.

Her cheekbones felt hollow. She felt like she might be sick.

Her hands kept trembling no matter how hard she tried to still them. She bit down on her lower lip and drew several long breaths.

When she stopped visibly shaking, she forced herself to speak. “Do you—have any information this week?”

It was almost funny to have to ask that question right then. Although—that had always been the meaning of the question. She’d just gotten used to it.

Suddenly it hurt again, and the timing was almost amusing in some sickening way. She wasn’t sure if the humor would be categorised as irony or black humor. She just knew it was something bitter, something painful to think about. But somehow also cruelly funny. Draco smirked and pulled out a scroll of parchment. He’d driven his point home; as though he’d knifed her and then broken off the hilt so it stayed. That he didn’t reiterate the insult showed that he knew.

Her hand shook faintly as she accepted the scroll and stood up.

She left without another word.

It was just over week until Christmas.

When she returned to Grimmauld Place, she went and took a calming Draught. She stood in her potion supply closet waiting for her hands to stop shaking.

When her hands were steady again, she glanced around the little room wistfully. She straightened a little basket full of what looked like leather pocketbooks. The Christmas presents she’d planned that year were rather sad. She’d made emergency healing kits. Again. She made them every year. The

basics, all packed together and shrunk down to be easily carried. Hermione had no money to buy books for her friends that they would never read, nor the time to knit hats or scarves for them. So she gave them potions and hoped they'd used them rather than apparating back with easily remedied injuries. The girls did; they would ask for refills. Neville, Fred, Dean Thomas, and Michael Corner would occasionally use their kits too.

But Hermione didn't think Harry or Ron had ever even opened theirs. Every time she gave them new kits they'd sheepishly return their old ones untouched. They always either ignored their injuries or apparated back panicking over them. In that regard, Ginny had been an excellent partner for Harry and Ron; both boys tended to return in better condition when Ginny went on missions with them.

Hermione swallowed hard, pulled down vials from the shelves and started assembling an additional kit.

She had a job. How she felt about it on a particular day didn't matter.

It never mattered.

The next week when Draco apparated into the shack, he and Hermione both paused and stared at each other.

"I have a Christmas present for you," she said after a minute. "Well, it's not really. But I suppose contextually it is."

She pulled out the small leather case and held it out to him.

"It's—it's an emergency healing kit. I give them to all my friends."

Draco quirked an eyebrow and sighed faintly as he plucked it from her hands; as though accepting it were a favour to her. "If you're not going to go to a healer, you should at least carry this." She was speaking quickly, trying to say it all before he cut her off and flung it back in her face. "If you let me teach you a few spells, you'll be able to heal most basic injuries yourself."

He flipped the case open and scanned the contents. "You realise I can buy most of these."

Hermione's mouth twitched. She hadn't expected him to be grateful; she'd braced herself that he might not even accept it.

"Then you can easily refill any you use." Hermione forced herself to step closer and ran her finger along, pointing at the various vials.

"They're all labeled. There's the potion for concussions; any type of blow to the head and you should use a diagnostic to check. Murtlap essence for minor skin abrasions or small bruises. The bruise cream is for deeper and more serious hematomas. The Essence of Dittany is a trump card for most injuries. Unless it's a cursed wound, Dittany can help with most severe external injuries, werewolf bites, splinching. Unless it's the eyes or a brain injury, in which case you'll need to call a specialist. Don't even think about apparating or any other kind of displacement transport if you injure your eyes or have any type of wound that punctures the skull. The pressure will do irreversible damage. This antivenin will counteract venomous bites or stings unless it's a class XXXX type beast or above. The antidote here can counteract the anticoagulant properties of vampire bites." Draco snorted faintly.

Hermione continued doggedly. “Calming Draught. Blood replenishing potion. This here is for internal organ damage, kidney contusions and the like. I’ll teach you a diagnostic to check for things like that. And this one, it’s an analgesic for the acid boil curse. I’m assuming you know the counter-curse. The analgesic will neutralise it completely and it cuts the pain. You’ll still need to have all the bones removed carefully and then regrown. But it will reduce the recovery times by several days and decrease the likelihood of nerve damage. And a chocolate bar, for dementors. When you pull the items out of the case they’ll assume their proper size. I shrank them so the kit wouldn’t be too large to carry.”

Hermione didn’t mention that she had expanded Draco’s kit far beyond the basics that she gave to everyone else. In the case of her friends she could count on them to come to her if they had an injury. It was not an assumption she could make with Draco. If he wasn’t going to trust healers anymore, at least she could equip him enough to deal with more injuries by himself.

Draco snapped the case shut. Hermione stared up at him seriously. “Just—keep it with you. Let me teach you a diagnostic, so you can tell if you’re dealing with anything serious.”

“I know how to perform a diagnostic charm, Granger.” His expression was slightly offended.

“Probably not the one I want to teach you. It’s a bit unusual. More obscure. Better for war injuries. The basic ones are household charms, for diagnosing fevers or infections and daily injuries. Most medical textbooks will teach a general diagnostic with the assumption that the healer can then narrow their focus progressively. But if you’re using a diagnostic, it’s probably going to be after a raid or duel. So you can focus on detecting curses and physical injuries, there’s no need to look for dragon pox or check whether there’s any partial Transfiguration.”

She demonstrated the diagnostic by casting it on herself.

“See? The spell is simple. What’s complex is reading it, but we’ll just stick to the basics. The colours and locations are indicative. I’m not cursed or injured so the reading is rather boring. The way I tilt my wand can bring various areas into a focused reading. Everything is a healthy sky blue. If it starts turning turquoise, that indicates a dangerous level of blood loss or drop in body temperature. If it's royal blue, that’s a fever. It reads from the head down. The brighter the color, the more minor the injury. If it’s black, even the slightest trace of black, it’s potentially a mortal wound. Red indicates an external injury. Purple is for internal injuries. If there’s purple on your head, that indicates a concussion; on your torso that means you should take the potion for internal damage. Lime green would indicate a minor hex but viridian means curses; get to spell damage or call your healer. Yellow is for poison or venom. Fractured bones will show up pale orange, broken and displaced is more pumpkin-toned. If it’s a fracture you should heal it yourself. It’s an easy spell, I’ll teach it to you.”

Malfoy was begrudgingly cooperative and even seemed slightly intrigued at times. Hermione determinedly plowed through as much training as she thought she could get away with and got him to demonstrate that he could do them all himself.

He had a knack for it. She had thought he probably would. A natural occlumens with a razor-edged focus carved into him; the precision would come naturally to him. She suspected he knew a bit about the theory of healing. She almost asked him why, but his cooperativeness felt highly conditional. She stifled her curiosity and just kept rattling off tips for healing.

“Anyway, those are the basics,” she finished at last.

He glanced at his watch. “You realise you’ve been talking for almost two hours straight.”

Hermione blushed. “It’s still very basic.”

There was a pause, and Hermione realised she’d moved so close to Draco their shoulders were brushing. She could smell the scent of oakmoss that clung to his skin. She looked up at him, and their eyes met.

For a moment everything between them ceased to be so tense and resentful; as though the war faded away for a moment, and it was just them. She almost smiled at him. Because he could be kind to her when he wanted to be, and she was so tired that day.

She tried not to think about how pathetic that made her.

Then Draco pressed his lips into a flat line, and she saw his jaw clench. His eyes flashed, and she watched them sharpen; like a gaze of a bird of prey, they began to grow cruel. She stepped back and dropped her eyes. “Happy Christmas, Draco.”

He stared at her contemplatively. His expression was unreadable. She felt her heart rate increase. She was never quite sure what he might do.

She tried not to let her fingers fidget.

He rolled his jaw. Hermione felt cold and almost hollow inside as she braced herself.

“I have something for you,” he said, reaching into his robes.

He pulled out something that was rolled up in oilcloth and held it out toward her. She accepted it and unrolled the cloth slowly to reveal its contents. Inside lay a set of beautiful and deadly daggers, sheathed in delicate mesh holsters.

“They should be small enough to keep one strapped to your forearm. The holsters are acromantula silk dipped in manticore blood; they’ll resize to you and won’t restrict your movement at all. You should wear the other dagger on your calf.” He looked visibly awkward as he relayed the information. His eyes were avoiding Hermione, but they kept sweeping back to watch as she studied the daggers.

“Are these Goblin-wrought silver?” she asked after a minute.

“Yes. They’re dipped in manticore venom, as a matter of fact.”

She looked up at him sharply. “Does that mean—“

“It died. Tragically.” The corner of his mouth quirked slightly. “The inclement weather, I suspect. I filed all the paperwork and turned the corpse over to McNair yesterday.”

“But not before you harvested some venom,” Hermione said, pulling one of the daggers out of the sheath and staring at the razor sharp edge, capable of cutting through almost anything. The blade would slide through a shield spell or protective wards as though they weren’t there.

“Not much, or it would have been suspicious. But enough for a handful of weapons and an extra vial for a rainy day.”

Hermione began mentally running the numbers on Draco's gift. Two goblin-wrought silver knives: at least a hundred galleons each. Manticore venom: another hundred or so right there. Acromantula silk holsters: another hundred galleons.

Draco's Christmas present for her was worth a small fortune. She wasn't even sure if he knew that or not.

Hermione was obsessive about her budget and her resources. She had to be. She cut every corner and saved every drop of potion and Knut she could. There was a corner of her mind that was endlessly trying to think of new ways to save or conceive of untapped resources.

It staggered her, the casual way in which Draco could hand her an enchanted shield cloak or a set of knives collectively worth more than her annual hospital and potion budget for the entire Resistance.

She would sell them. At least one, possibly both. On the black market she could probably get a decent return, enough to buy more acromantula venom or Essence of Dittany, or to restock some of the other hospital supplies. Or maybe it would be better to turn them over to Moody or Kingsley; they would get good use from knives like that. She might be able to use the daggers to negotiate a permanent budget increase.

"Thank you," she said, resheathing the blade she was holding and slipping everything into her satchel.

"For the record, you are not allowed to sell them or give them to anyone else."

Hermione's hands stilled, and her eyes darted guiltily up to Draco's face. His eyes were locked on hers, and the silver in them glittered.

"Is that clear, Granger?" His tone was ice.

She gave a begrudging nod.

"I will expect you to wear them every time you forage. I will look for them."

She tensed and swallowed hard with irritation. "Fine."

His expression softened marginally. "Well, this has been delightful. I cannot even remember how many times I've wished I could spend Christmas Eve getting lectured on how to read a diagnostic charm." He smiled insincerely. Hermione said nothing. There was a pause, and then he added, "Per your request, here's a warning. I'm going to start teaching you hand-to-hand combat starting next week."

Then he reached into his robes and pulled out a scroll of parchment. "My latest installment for Moody." As she accepted it, he smirked at her. "I have to say, you've ended up being quite expensive, Granger."

He vanished without a sound. On Christmas Day, Hermione had the morning hospital shift. Angelina had been badly cursed during a raid in Muggle London the night before; she'd been hit in the knee with the acid curse, and while she was down, a Death Eater had added on an additional internal organ destroying curse. Fred had managed to grab hold of her and bring her back to Hermione before Angelina died in his arms.

The final repair work was too complex for Padma or Poppy.

Hermione sat in the quiet hospital ward and slowly reconstructed the tissue and tendons in Angelina's knee. "Alright, I need you to bend it, and see if the tissue formed properly. Regrowing bones for injuries like this doesn't always work properly."

Angelina bit her lip. Her skin was grey from pain, but she moved her knee as requested. "Ugggghh." She gasped faintly and stopped. "Inside. It hurts inside—like it's grinding."

Hermione cast a diagnostic and studied it. Due to the urgency of saving Angelina's organs, the acid curse had been overlooked for several minutes before being countered. It had destroyed most of the bones in Angelina's knee and left huge pockets of lost tissue. It was difficult to repair when there was so little of the original tissue left to build from. Hermione had initially feared she'd have to amputate it, but there was just enough intact after the bone regrowth for it to be healable.

"I see the problem. I'm going to stun you. You don't need to be awake for this part."

Angelina nodded and closed her eyes.

It took nearly four hours before Hermione rennervated Angelina.

"Alright, try moving it again."

Angelina lifted her leg and bent it slightly. "That's better. It twinges a little." Her colour seemed much healthier.

"You'll need to stay off it for at least a month, but I think you'll be able to walk on it. It will hurt, particularly on cold days. You may limp a little. You'll always feel it. But you can still fight, if you want."

"I'm not leaving the fight," Angelina said firmly.

Hermione nodded, unsurprised, and began massaging a potion into Angelina's new skin. As Hermione worked, she became aware of Angelina's intense stare. Hermione glanced up and met her gaze. "What?"

Angelina tilted her head, still studying Hermione. "Sometimes I try to remember you from before the war, and I can't see that person anymore."

Hermione's jaw tensed. She tried to restrict her advocacy for the Dark Arts to Order meetings, but her position had become known in the wider Resistance over time. Members of DA regularly took it upon themselves to evangelise to Hermione about the power of Good and the evil of the Dark Arts.

She could tell, by the expression on Angelina's face, that she was about to be subjected to a new lecture.

She forced her voice to stay even. "Who is it you thought I was then?" "I don't know. Loud, forward, positive. Rather abrasive, to be honest. When you organised DA, you were a bit ruthless, but there was a honest sort of righteousness to it. Now, when you're not in healer-mode, you just seem ruthless. You're so quiet most of the time, but there's this rage around you that I feel sometimes. Like the war turned you into someone else. I feel like you let it." The corner of Hermione's mouth twitched, and she felt her eyes narrow. "War is a crucible. Do you think any of

us will come out on the other side the same as we were?"

Angelina looked down at her knee and shrugged. "I'll carry scars inside and out, but deep down I'm always going to be the same person." Angelina looked back at Hermione. "But I don't know if you're the same and I just never saw it, or if you've really changed that much. I feel like you've let go of yourself."

Hermione's hands stilled, and she sat back. "Let go?"

Angelina shifted and looked uncomfortable. "I guess I'm worried about you. Fred said, when he was visiting George here, that it seemed like something happened to you. Like the last bits of the old you just—disappeared one day. And I've been watching you lately, all I see is this —I don't even know what it is. Sometimes I think it's rage. Other times I think it's despair. But it's as though you're lost in it."

Hermione's mouth felt dry, and she swallowed repeatedly, buying herself time by recorking vials. She gripped the glass so hard her hands shook faintly.

"This war has eaten me, Angelina," she finally said slowly.

Before she could say anything else, Hermione found herself abruptly jerked forward with a mouthful of hair in her mouth as Angelina pulled her into a tight hug.

"Oh, Hermione. Don't let yourself start thinking like that. You have to be able to visualise victory. Feel it. Fight for it. See yourself on the other side of the war. If you let go of that hope, you're going end up somewhere dark. Light always wins over Darkness. But you have to believe it."

Hermione felt something inside her stiffen. She pulled herself away from Angelina, shaking her head, her mouth curling. "That's not enough to win a war. I'm not going to bet this war on my or anyone else's ability to believe in victory."

"You still want us to use the Dark Arts, don't you?" Angelina stared at Hermione with the expression of a disappointed parent.

Hermione struggled against rolling her eyes as she nodded.

Angelina's shoulders drooped slightly. "If we lose ourselves to win, is it really winning? If we poison ourselves to get it and become the monsters we're fighting?"

Hermione clenched her jaw, as she fought against the urge to shake Angelina. "What exactly do you think will happen if we lose?"

"We'll die." Angelina shrugged faintly.

Hermione suddenly understood why Draco hated Gryffindors so intensely. She couldn't stop herself from scoffing. "Do you really think we'll just die? Angelina, they're not going to shut down Sussex when they win the war. We're livestock. You didn't see the prisoners they brought from the last curse division. They were—" Hermione's voice shook. "They were dissolving, rotting, skinned and still alive, there were things crawling inside them—" her voice broke off. "The ones that could still speak begged me to kill them."

Hermione hissed between her teeth. The choking sense of frustration rose as she was forced to face,

once again, the perpetual optimism of Resistance fighters. The stress and despair inside her felt toxic, like acid eroding her slowly at a cellular level. “If we lose—They’ll round us all up and use the Resistance fighters as lab rats or whatever else they want to until they run out of us. After we blew up the last curse division, they just made a bigger one. The war isn’t supposed to end with the Resistance. The Death Eaters are supposed to conquer the Muggle Europe next. That’s the vision. The deal. All the Dark Beings allied with Tom because he promised them that. I don’t know if he’s insane enough to think he can do it, but that’s his claim. And he’ll probably at least pretend to.”

Hermione felt like she might start hyperventilating just thinking about it. Her chest was stuttering and jerking and she kept drawing short, quick breaths.

“But, Hermione,” Angelina laid her hand across Hermione’s, “we’re winning.”

Hermione froze and blinked slowly as she stared at Angelina in disbelief. She almost laughed but then realised with horror that Angelina was entirely serious. “We’re—what?”

“Winning.” Angelina’s jaw jut out, and her expression grew defensive. “We are. Think of all the prison raids. We got hundreds of people out since the spring. We’ve successfully countered hundreds of attacks this year. Staying true to the Light is paying off. The war is favouring us now. Soon the wizarding world will start to realise that. That’s how hope works. It takes a spark.”

Hermione felt as though she’d been struck sharply in the head; as though she were mildly concussed and it explained the surreal world she abruptly found herself in. She stared wordlessly at Angelina, who gave Hermione an encouraging smile. “You aren’t out there so you probably don’t see it. I know things were dark for awhile, but it’s always darkest before the dawn, and I’m pretty sure, we’re at dawn now.”

Hermione swallowed hard as she struggled against the temptation to scream. She could hear the blood pounding in her ears and a migraine rapidly manifesting.

They weren’t winning.

They were surviving. The Resistance was balanced on a knife edge held in place by Draco. Using intelligence Gabrielle Delacour used her body to tear out of Death Eaters. They were using it to maintain the Resistance while the Order struggled vainly to find Horcruxes that could be anywhere in Europe.

They were not winning. They were not anywhere close to winning.

Angelina was staring at her hopefully. “Yes…” Hermione heard herself to say. “I—I suppose you’re right. I’m not out there, so I don’t see it. I—didn’t realise that we’re—winning.”

Angelina nodded and hugged Hermione again. “The problem is that you’re too isolated. Pomfrey goes and spends her time with the Hogwarts professors, and Padma has Parvati to keep her in the loop. But you hardly leave this house except to get potion ingredients. I know Harry and Ron aren’t around that much, but you have other friends.You need friends. When everything feels lost—that’s what’s going to carry you through and help you hold on. The rest of us, we talk about this. I know you’re really smart, Hermione, but when it’s things like Good and Evil you can’t expect to get the answer from a book. It’s something you have to feel. Like flying—well, I reckon that’s a bad example to use with you—but, you have to be able to believe it will catch you. It’s all part of the journey, hitting the bottom so you can spring up. Good takes sacrifice. I hope, once the war is over,

that you'll be able to see that. That's how Light and Darkness work."

"Of course." Hermione said dully, avoiding Angelina's eyes. "I guess I've just been too lost in my own world."

"It's alright. You don't need to feel bad about it. It can happen to anyone. I was in a pretty dark place after George and Katie both got hurt. It's an easy place to go during a war. But then Harry gave everyone in DA a pep talk. He talked about how Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald. And he talked about the Order during the First Wizarding War, how bad things were. Everyone thought Tom was going to win then; the Ministry was using Unforgivables, but the Order held out. There was death and betrayal but Love and Light always shine brightest in those moments. That's why they always win. We just have to trust in them. Right after Harry said all that, I think it was that same month even, we had our first successful prison raid."

Hermione stood up sharply. She felt as though she couldn't breathe. She needed—air. Cold. She needed a Calming Draught. "I need something from my supply closet. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Hermione's made her way dazedly toward her supply closet.

She stumbled down the hall and shoved the door closed behind her as she shakily uncorked a vial and downed a dose of Calming Draught. As the potion took effect, Hermione gave a sharp gasp and burst into tears.

She stood there sobbing for several minutes before leaning across the worktop. She buried her face in her arms and tried to come to terms with the conversation she'd just had.

She hadn't realised—it hadn't even occurred to her how the shift in the war would come across to the Resistance. Of course. Of course, to them nothing had changed. They all thought that by sticking to their convictions about Good and Evil that the war had simply shifted out of inherent inevitability.

They had no idea that Death Eaters were being tortured for information, or that Hermione had sold herself to Draco in order to earn most of it. Hermione had unwittingly proven their mythos and in the process turned herself into Cassandra giving unheeded warnings at the gates of Troy.

Hermione gave a gasping sob and tried to breathe slowly through her nose as she struggled to think.

She had to move forward with Draco.

Padma was—passable for potion making and healing. Kingsley had looked over all Hermione's notes and somehow recruited a backup casualty healer. She wondered how long he'd been holding that piece back.

She'd compiled all her notes on the counter-curses she'd developed over the years and instructions explaining the curse analysis techniques.

Moody seemed to be growing somewhat frustrated by the lack of progress she was reporting week after week. There had been a shift in both his and Kingsley's recent behavior when she reported to them about Draco, a newfound skepticism, as though she were falling short of expectations.

Now she understood. They needed Draco under control.

Draco’s information was still excellent, but he had set the terms from the very beginning. It was a balance of power they were unwilling to trust and eager to shift.

They wanted him collared.

Hermione was stalling.

*Flashback 21*

**Christmas 2002**

The Weasleys spent their Christmas at Shell Cottage. When Padma arrived to take over the hospital shift, Hermione changed her clothes and apparated to join them.

She stood outside in the snow for several minutes as she tried to brace herself. The conversation with Angelina had knocked her off-kilter, and she felt as though she were grasping for a sense of control.

She stared at the front door and mentally rehearsed the day. Christmas would be quiet; a far cry from past holidays. Every year everyone was a little quieter and a little more drunk. The year before, Arthur had become overwhelmed by the number of people and had a fit until Molly was forced to leave with him.

Hermione could go through the motions. Smile. Sing carols. Check on Arthur and George. She took a deep breath and opened the door.

“Oi! Hermione’s here!” Fred bellowed when she walked in.

Everyone turned and descended on her. They were all in surprisingly high spirits, cheerful and buzzed. A mug of wassail was shoved into her hands before she’d gotten across the room.

Everyone was decked in Christmas jumpers from Molly.

Hermione surreptitiously lined up vials of hangover potion along the top of the mantel.

Bill was sitting in one corner, quiet among the bustle. Fleur was seated on the arm of his chair, running her fingers through his hair.

Harry and Ginny were squished into an armchair, whispering together. Harry and Ron had returned from another horcrux hunt only a few days before.

“Hermione dear, so glad you made it. This is for you,” Molly pressed a gift, wrapped in tissue paper, into Hermione’s hands.

Hermione perched on an ottoman and opened it. A green jumper with an H in the middle.

“Thank you, Molly,” she said. “This is beautiful.”

“Mum! Why are you sticking Hermione in Slytherin green?” Ron said, peering over.

Molly smacked him, wearing an expression of offense. “Ronald! It’s emerald green and it’s a lovely colour for her skin tone. It reminded me of Harry’s eyes.” “Looks like Slytherin green to me.” Ron grimaced as Hermione pulled it over her head. “Ugh. Gives me nightmares just looking at it.”

Hermione and Molly’s relationship was somewhat strained. When Arthur was first cursed, there had

been a great deal of hope that Hermione and Bill would collaboratively be able to reverse or break it. Molly had been effusive in her appreciation of all Hermione's efforts. However, as time passed and hope dwindled, Molly withdrew. It wasn't blame, per se. It was simply painful. Hermione represented a deep hope that had failed.

Their interactions were still warm, but they kept them limited.

Hermione knew from second-hand accounts that Molly had vehement objections to her advocacy for the Dark Arts, but it was not a conversation they had ever actually had together.

Hermione wasn't sure if Molly had chosen the colour on the basis of skin tone, or if it was a form of reproof. It wasn't really worth thinking about. She was so tired of pointlessly arguing about it.

She left Ron and Molly to argue and went to find Arthur.

Mr Weasley was sitting on the floor in the corner, going through a lift-the-flap book. Hermione watched him carefully and cast a diagnostic spell on his brain. Arthur Weasley as an adult was still locked away somewhere. The curse Lucius used hadn't driven Arthur mad or scrubbed his memory. The magic had suspended Arthur's mind at a specific point in early childhood. The rest of Arthur was still inside, waiting to get out; Hermione could see it in the diagnostic. But she didn't know how to break through the magic without causing real and severe brain damage.

The lost parts of Arthur's brain were slowly deteriorating. His brain activity gradually shrinking smaller as the disused neural connections died off.

There was nothing Hermione could do about it.

"Arthur," Hermione knelt down beside him, "I have a Christmas present for you."

He looked up from his book expectantly. Every time their eyes met she felt a pang in her chest and an overwhelming desire to offer apologies he couldn't understand. *I'm sorry. I'm sorry I can't get you out. I'm sorry I can't fix this.*

"I wasn't going to buy presents for anyone this year, but I saw this in a shop, and I knew I had to get it for you." Hermione reached into her pocket and pulled out the gift. "It's called a rubber duck. It will float on water. You can have it in your baths. Or put it in the sink."

Arthur snatched it from her hand and stood up suddenly. Hermione gripped her wand. She'd been knocked across a room by him on several occasions when he'd become overexcited or cross.

"Bill! Bill, do this." His voice was adult, but his words and the insistent tone were childlike. He waved the duck over his head. "In the sink!" Bill donned the false expression of cheerfulness that he always wore around his father and leaned forward. "What have you got there?"

Arthur carried it over and shoved the toy into Bill's face until it nearly poked Bill in the eye. Hermione winced.

"A duck! In the sink."

"Right, should we see how it floats?" Bill stood up. Arthur turned on his heel and proceeded to bolt down a hallway toward the bathroom. "No running, Arthur!"

Hermione headed further into the house and found Fred and George outside in the gardens. George

was attempting to do a handstand on his crutches. As Hermione opened the door, he lost his balance and fell face first into a snowdrift. “George!” Hermione went and pulled him out, brushing the snow off by smacking him. “If you’re going to do things like this, at least be sober.”

“Sorry, Mum.” George said jokingly as he let her pull him upright and fuss over him while Fred picked the crutches up.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him, and he kissed her full on the lips.

She stared at him astonished.

“Happy Christmas, Herms. A pretty girl deserves a Yuletide kiss. Fred promised his to Angelina, so I drew the short straw and had to kiss the woman who saved my life.” He placed a hand across his heart and smiled beautifically.

Hermione shook her head. “You’re awful. What if that had been my first kiss?”

George donned an expression of elaborate despair. “It wasn’t? Been snogging other patients of yours before me?”

Hermione felt the tips of her ears grow warm and looked away. “Actually my first kiss was with Viktor.”

“Crushed my heart, you have.” George stumbled back overdramatically with his crutches. “It’s because I’m not surly enough, isn’t it? Or maybe you only like Seekers.”

Hermione shook her head and tried not to think about surliness or Seekers. “I’m going back in. If you must risk your neck after all I’ve done healing you, at least do it when I’m not looking.”

She went back inside and seated herself on the couch in the corner, watching the festivities with a sense of bewilderment.

Charlie was teasing Ginny and Harry, he tilted his head back and laughed. Hermione couldn’t remember the last time she’d heard Charlie laugh. Or Ron or Harry. They were all happy. Happier than she had seen them in years.

As Hermione observed it, a creeping sense of horror came over her.

The cheerfulness brimming inside the cottage was more than Yuletide merriment and alcohol. The house was bursting, nearly vibrating with a sense of hopefulness.

Hermione wouldn’t have understood it if not for the conversation with Angelina.

It wasn’t just the Resistance. The Order members also believed they were on the way to winning the war.

As Hermione sat in the corner absorbing it, she felt as though she were trapped inside a daydream charm while the world around her burned down.

The Order would never change tactics now; they would never agree to use the Dark Arts. She had done this.

If Draco ever turned on them, or achieved whatever atonement he was in pursuit of and ended his service, the Resistance would start to free fall, and there would be nothing to catch them. And if the

Order ever found out about Draco, in any context… it would likely break the entire organization. The trust in Kingsley and Moody would be shattered.

Hermione felt like she might be sick. She wanted to leave.

She sat in the corner like a statue.

Harry came and dropped down on the couch next to her. They watched the room. Ginny was with Arthur. Ron, Fred, and George appeared to be in the middle of a prank of some sort. Molly was bustling about, setting out food and Charlie was helping her.

“This—is everything I ever wanted,” Harry said after a minute. “This is what keeps me going. Every day.”

Hermione was silent.

“Are you thinking about your family?” Harry studied her carefully. Hermione gave a short nod. Harry wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. “Someday your parents will be here with us too.”

Hermione watched Molly pause to press a kiss on Arthur’s forehead and admire his duck.

“They—they won’t; they’ll never come back from Australia,” she said quietly. Harry looked at her with confusion. Her eyes dropped down to her lap. “Extensive obliviation only has a certain window for reversal. Otherwise there is a high risk of acute brain damage. If I were going to reverse the memory charm, it needed to be done before Christmas last year; before the five year mark.”

There was a long silence. “You never told me that.” Harry’s voice was devastated.

Hermione fidgeted with the sleeve of her jumper and didn’t look up at him. “It was easier to just focus on work than to think about it. I knew the risk when I decided to hide them.”

“I’m sorry.” Harry squeezed her hand. “I’m so so sorry, Hermione.”

“It’s fine. I’ve come to terms with the fact that protecting people may mean losing them.”

“Well, not me. You’ll always be my family.”

Before Hermione could say anything, Molly bustled over, holding a camera and dragging Ron with her. “Let’s get a picture of you three. Hermione, you scoot over a bit, dear, so Ron can sit next to you. There now. Arms around each other. Harry, try to smooth your hair. Oh, never mind. Smile…”

Hermione couldn’t quite manage a smile. The corners of her mouth curled faintly as Ron and Harry’s heavy arms wrapped around her shoulders. There was a blinding flash.

“That will be lovely. We haven’t gotten a picture of you all together in years.” Molly went over to take a picture of Bill and Fleur.

Ron snorted as he watched his mother posing Fleur and then tugged at one of Hermione’s curls that had slipped free from her braids. “A hair out of place; I guess you aren’t a Slytherin after all.”

Hermione gave a faint smile. “That must have been why the Sorting Hat stuck me in Gryffindor. It’s probably why Harry didn’t get sent there either.” She and Ron both looked over at Harry’s tangled head of hair. He looked as though he’d been electrocuted and tried to hide it with pomade. Half of it

appeared to have been combed at some point, but the rest stuck up and pointed in various directions.

“What did you do to it?” Hermione said, shaking her head in disbelief.

Harry flushed. “I had it combed. And then Ginny and I—erm, snogged.”

Ron made a gagging sound. “Snogged.” He scoffed. “That’s my baby sister. Just thinking about you two makes me wanted to gouge my eyes out.”

“Trust me, I’ve wanted to,” Hermione muttered. “I swear, neither of them know basic privacy or locking charms.”

Harry looked horrified.

“Ronald,” Molly said from across the room. “I want to take a picture with all the siblings! Come over to the tree. Stand next to Ginny.”

Hermione and Harry watched Ron amble over and pose for the family photo. Hermione felt as though her chest were being crushed. Harry glanced over at Hermione, and she noticed his expression shift slightly before he spoke. “When this is over, I hope things will go back to the way they were.”

He stared at her, and his eyes were young and old at the same time. A lifetime of memories were evoked by those eyes. Hermione’s heart caught in her throat as she stared back at him.

She started to open her mouth to say she wished that too. Because she did. She would do anything to somehow emerge on the other side of the war and still have something left.

But before she could say it, Harry caught hold of her hand and gripped it. “You’re my family. And I’ll always be yours. I know we’ve fought with each other a lot lately. But I know everything you wanted to do was because you were trying to protect us. I just can’t stand the thought of seeing what Dark Magic would do to you. I don’t know how to fight to win this war without you, and Ron, and the Weasley Family being there with me on the other side of it. I wish I’d told you this sooner, but I want us to fix things now. You’ve always looked out for me, better than anyone. I want you to know that I know that.”

Hermione’s eyes flooded with tears and her whole body shook.

*Harry, you don’t even know all I would be willing to do for you.*

She opened her mouth and then closed it, swallowing what she wanted to say.

“We haven’t won yet, Harry,” she finally said in a hoarse voice.

“I know. I know we’ve still got long way to go, but I don’t want to wait to say this.” Harry took a deep breath. “I haven’t looked out for you, and I’m sorry for that. I’ve been so worried about everyone going on raids, I never stopped to think about how it was for you. Ginny and I were talking, and she mentioned how awful it is in your hospital ward; that all you see is the very worst of every battle, over and over again, and I’m really sorry, I never realised—when Ron and I fought in the past, he always had his family and I always had you, but with this fight about the Dark Arts, he and I were both so focused on the Resistance that we didn’t think about you. The three of us were always strongest together. I want us to be that way again. What do you say?”

Hermione stared at Harry and wavered.

Her friend. Her best friend. Her very first friend. She would do anything for him. Anything to protect him.

Anything.

Even give him up.

*You already made your choice. If you try to have this, you'll only hurt him more when he finds out what you did. You'll only hurt yourself more if you let yourself believe it's real.*

She swallowed and slowly pulled her hand away. It was like crashing in slow motion. Knowing and doing it anyway. "I don't think I know how to be friends with you anymore, Harry." Her voice was low and firm.

Harry stared at her, his eyes wide and stunned. "What do you mean?"

Hermione stared down at her hands. A cold, creeping sensation spread through her. "We—we haven't been friends in years, Harry," she said matter-of-factly. "When exactly did you last treat me like your friend? When have you even walked into the hospital ward when it wasn't to visit someone else?"

"I—"

"I became a healer to try to protect you and you abandoned me for it."

"I—didn't. Hermione, I'll admit I could have done better, but it's not like Ron and I been having some sort of jolly time without you."

"Of—course." Hermione couldn't breathe. She kept speaking in the cruel, relentless voice she had learned from Draco. "You've had no time. Obviously the DA members take precedence; for the sake of unit cohesion. If you hadn't been so busy, I'm sure everything would be different. You would have been able to offer some kind of acknowledgment over the years. But since you had no time, you had no choice but to pat Ron on the shoulder after he called me bitch in front of the entire Order. After all, he is your dueling partner." Her tone was acrid.

"You were saying we should use the Killing Curse." Harry's voice was bitter and incredulous.

Hermione gave a faint laugh. "I still want you to."

There was a stunned silence. The whole room had fallen quiet. Harry was speechless for a full minute. "Still?"

Hermione gave a short nod.

Harry shook his head slowly as though he couldn't believe it.

"I'm a realist, Harry. I want this war to be done. I don't want the Order to think it won and then have everything start all over again in fourteen years, the way it did last time." Her tone was hard. Tired. She knew exactly where to cut.

Her heart hurt, her chest too. It felt as though there were something burning inside her abdominal cavity. If Harry were still holding her hand, he'd feel that she was shaking.

“Do you have any idea what Dark Magic does to a person?” Harry’s voice was furious.

Hermione kept her expression cold. “Of course I do; I’m a healer. It’s my part of speciality. And I’m telling you, it’s worth the cost. I’m not telling you to use Dark Rituals or drink unicorn blood, I’m just saying kill people who are trying to kill you. Are you really thinking you can just put him in prison somehow? Do you actually think you’ll defeat him with an expelliarmus? Are you willing to bet your life on it? Ron’s? Ginny’s? The entire Resistance? It is worth it to kill him and his supporters. Do you somehow not hate them enough yet to manage that?”

“I don’t. Because it will never be worth it,” Harry snapped. “We won’t win that way. I can’t fight that way. When I fight I’m thinking about all the people I love. How I’m protecting them and how I want to see them again. What is the point to any of it, if winning just means watching you and everyone else die slowly instead? Every battle is a test. Not giving into hatred is a choice. You don’t get to choose both Love and Hate. I won’t be like Tom Riddle in order to win. The lesson of the first war is that Love trumps all when people believe in it. We have to choose between what’s easy and what’s right. If we get it wrong we’ll never defeat him.”

“You’re accusing me of wanting easy choices?” Hermione was legitimately stunned.

“You want to use the Dark Arts because they’d be more ‘effective’. Yeah, I’d say that’s clearly a choice of easy instead of right.” Harry was pale, his fists clenched until the knuckles showed white. “The fight between Good and Evil is a test. You haven’t just failed it, Hermione, you’re trying to take the whole Resistance with you. I thought for a while that it was because you spent so much time with Snape. But I’m realising now, it’s you. You actually believe it.”

Hermione didn’t have to pretend to be enraged or bitter any longer. She scoffed in his face. “Of course I believe it. Think of Colin, Harry. Think of how Colin died in front of you and then multiply it. Multiply to include the casualties from every battle and raid in the last THREE YEARS. That—,” she gestured sharply around herself, “—has been my life since the moment I came back from training. That is how your friends are dying.”

“You don’t need to tell me, Hermione.” Harry’s voice was shaking, and he leaned toward her, his teeth flashing. “They were my friends. I trained them. I fought with them. I carried them back. I would die for them. I would do almost anything to have saved them. But when it comes to Light and Dark Magic, it matters. It’s never worth giving into the Dark Arts, no matter what you think you’ll get from it. The Order is going to stay Light.”

Something inside Hermione snapped. “You’re not Light if you let people sacrifice themselves in order to keep your hands and soul clean.” She sneered at him.

Harry turned pale.

“How dare you?” he finally said in a voice that vibrated with rage. “How fucking dare you? I have never—I would never—ask anyone to die for me. All I have ever wanted was for people to stop dying because of me. I don’t want to be the Chosen One. I don’t want this fucking war. All I ever wanted was a family. The people in this room are all I’ve got. My parents are dead. They sacrificed themselves believing in Love over Hate, and you’re saying what? That they were wrong? That if they’d just been as smart as you, I’d still have them? My godfather is dead. At least your parents are alive somewhere. I don’t even have that scrap of consolation. I would die to win this war with a smile on my face. I will fight for as long as it takes. But I won’t let people poison their souls. I won’t

tell them to go there. I won't set that kind of an example for the Resistance."

He glared at Hermione and she could feel the waves of rage coming off him. It reminded her, in a horrible way, of Draco.

"Ron was right," Harry added after a moment. The rage in his tone was suddenly gone, he sounded closer to devastated. "You are a bitch. You really don't understand the point of the Order."

"To protect the wizarding and Muggle worlds from Tom Riddle and his Death Eaters," Hermione said quietly. "That is the purpose of the Order of the Phoenix."

She stood up and stared down at Harry; memorising him with her eyes for a moment before she looked away. "But I suppose you're right, I am a bitch. I don't think there's any use denying it at this point." She gave a choked laugh. "It seems to be the one thing everyone consistently tells me. I hope you're right about the war, Harry. I really hope what you're doing is enough."

Hermione turned on her heel and walked out of Shell Cottage.

She walked through the garden and into the hills beyond. She kept walking. Her heart was beating so hard it hurt. The blood pounding in her ears was so loud she could barely hear the wind; though she felt the cold of it slicing against her cheeks.

Finally she stopped and looked around at the endless white surrounding her. It was a beautiful Christmas. Hermione couldn't remember the last time it had snowed on Christmas Day.

Her hands and feet were numb with cold. She wanted to stay there. Stay there and freeze. It couldn't possibly feel worse than she already felt.

She didn't want to think about how awful she currently felt. How much her head hurt. And her heart. It felt like a chasm in her chest. As though someone had sawn through her sternum and pried the bone apart with a retractor, the way the Muggles did for heart surgery. She was ripped open and it just—hurt. Agony cold as winter inside herself.

If she looked down, there would be blood in the snow.

"Hermione!" Ginny's voice cut through the wind.

Hermione turned.

"Hermione…" Ginny waded through the snow toward her. "What's wrong? What are you doing?"

Hermione stared dully at Ginny. "Doing?"

"You did that on purpose—I could tell—so Harry would be mad and let you leave. Why? He and Ron are all you've got. They might forget that half the time, but I know it. What are you doing? What is it you're afraid of? Even before Harry went over. You were sitting on the couch looking like you were attending our funerals. What's wrong?"

Hermione stared mutely as Ginny; shivering in Slytherin green. Ginny reached out and cast a warming charm on her.

"I—," Hermione's voice started and then failed for several seconds.

"I can't do this anymore, Ginny. I can't pretend things will be alright. Even if we won tomorrow

morning, I’m not going to change my mind that we could have done better. The Dark Arts could shorten the war and save Resistance fighters. If Harry expects me to be standing next to him smiling when this is over, he should have that illusion shattered now.”

Ginny stared at Hermione. Her lashes had ice crystals caught in them, glittering in the light. Her hair was blown back by the wind, exposing the scar running along her face; the months had faded it somewhat, but the cold made it appear more stark against her pale skin. The disfigurement made Ginny’s prettiness more startling.The contrast of elements made her striking. A tragic type of mesmerisation.

“You—you don’t expect to be with us,” Ginny said slowly, her eyes were wide and sober. “After the war.”

“I have given myself to this war, Ginny. When it's over—there won’t be anything left of me.”

Ginny shook her head and reached toward Hermione. “Don’t say that—Hermione—“

“Ginny, if I am offered another empty word of encouragement, I may snap.” Hermione’s voice was flat. She drew a sharp breath, then exhaled and watched the condensation vanish into the sky. “I can’t—I don’t have the energy to pretend for all of you. I’m too tired.”

Ginny opened her mouth to reply, but Hermione apparated away.

She went back to Grimmauld Place and hid in the library.

She felt frozen the next day as she worked. She didn’t want to talk to anyone. She felt as though her heart had broken. She could occlude the mental aspects, but she hadn’t realised just how much grief could physically hurt.

Moody found her working on potions.

“Granger, Severus wants to see you tonight.”

Hermione turned to stare at Moody with a guarded expression. “Why?”

“To discuss your progress.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “I thought you kept him informed.”

Moody’s expression didn’t change. “He has questions he wants answered.” Hermione felt a faint sinking sensation in her stomach. “What time?”

“Seven.”

“Alright, I’ll be there then.” She turned back to her cauldron. She didn’t look back at Moody as he stood appraising her for several seconds before he turned to leave.

*Flashback 22*

**December 2002**

The house at Spinner's End was crammed with bubbling potions.

Hermione turned around the room slowly and paused in surprise as she noticed a cauldron shimmering in the corner. She stepped over and watched the spiraling steam rising from the surface. She sniffed it surreptitiously—spicy, earthy scent of oakmoss, smoky undertones of cedar and parchment—no. She sniffed again. Papyrus.

It felt like receiving a diagnosis she'd expected but still hoped to be wrong about. Her stomach dropped sharply. She stepped abruptly away and glanced at the other surrounding cauldrons. There was a aching sensation inside her chest that she tried to ignore.

"This is quite a variety of love potions you're brewing," she said, looking over to where Severus was stooped over a simmering cauldron. "A new project for the Dark Lord. He's suddenly developed an interest in trying to weaponise it," Severus said, sneering down at the murky, lumescent liquid he was working over. Hermione felt her blood run cold. "Is that a possibility?" Severus shrugged with a faint smile. "I am both skeptical and unmotivated, so most likely not. I believe it was more of a passing notion than anything he has a sincere interest in. I'm drawing up a comprehensive report to present in case he asks about it. And I'm doing it in my home rather than in the lab to ensure no one offers any groundbreaking ideas." Hermione surveyed the room. There were ten varieties of love potion and a few aphrodisiacs she recognised, as well as an additional fifteen that appeared experimental. "What would constitute as a weaponised love potion?" "Something of exceptional power that doesn't require redosage. I believe he imagines himself using it for interrogations." "That's—obscene," Hermione finally said. "Indeed. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, he has other matters he regards as more urgent for Sussex to focus on."

Hermione stood, watching Severus crush ashwinder eggs for several minutes in silence.

"Draco says that Sussex is trying to develop a way to prevent further rescues." There was a pause before Severus turned and looked at her thoughtfully.

"I didn't realise he was aware of that."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "An excellent spy. Isn't that what you said?"

"So it would seem," Severus muttered, turning back to his mortar and pestle. "Do you know why he's spying yet?

Hermione's eyes dropped to her shoes. "No," she admitted. "He says things that seem true, but I can't make out the motive behind them."

There was a pause, filled with the hiss of simmering liquid and grinding stone.

"Are you aware he's climbing rank?" Severus said, turning to his cauldron and pouring the

powdered ashwinder shells into the liquid in a gradual figure eight across the surface.

Hermione was quiet for several seconds. “I hadn’t heard that.” “I mentioned it to Kingsley a few weeks ago. Climbing higher. Consolidating power. I don’t pretend to know all you do together during your weekly—meetings… but I sometimes wonder if you even remember that when he’s not with you, he spends his time killing people.”

Hermione’s breath caught in her throat while Severus continued in an unsettlingly conversational tone. “I’ve rarely seen anyone who used Dark Magic as unsparingly as he has recently. The Dark Lord is thrilled by the exceptional tool he has crafted for himself. Those who make the mistake of getting in Draco’s way have a habit of dying from suspiciously ingenious uses of ‘Resistance’ spells. A few weeks ago, one of the marked Death Eaters, Gibbon, was found with his limbs flayed and dismembered. I helped analyse the corpse; there was an exceptional web of Dark Magic used to force Gibbon to stay alive for nearly a day before he finally died.”

Hermione froze and shook her head sharply. “That’s not—Draco wouldn’t—you said yourself he’s not a sadist.”

Severus looked over at her from the corner of his eye. “Did you think not being a sadist means he’s never tortured anyone to death?” His expression was contemptuous. “I’m sure you read his runes. What manner of things do you suppose he does ruthlessly and without fail?”

Hermione stiffened until her body shook and her jaw twitched. “You kill people too and I’ve never questioned your loyalty because of it, Severus.”

He snorted faintly and his lips curled. “I have only one loyalty; to the purpose of the Order. The horrors I am obliged to commit, I commit out of necessity. Do you think I enjoy feeling my soul slowly tear itself apart and poison me? All while being derided and doubted by those who would never be willing to make a similar sacrifice?” He shook his head slightly. “However, that is irrelevant. Gibbon was not a necessity. He was not important. He was not powerful. There was nothing strategic or in the interests of the Order about killing him. Certainly not anything to necessitate dismembering him while keeping him alive in the process.”

Hermione kept steadily shaking her head. “It might have been someone else. You don’t know it was Draco.”

Severus froze and turned slowly to face Hermione. “It was Draco. I know it was Draco. The reason I know it is because while dissecting the spellwork I came across the signature of an interesting enchantment. One that I personally invented. A containment enchantment I only ever taught one person. You. You were using it to treat his runes, weren’t you?”

The whole room wobbled in Hermione’s vision, and she caught the edge of the table to keep from falling.

Severus stared down at her, his expression menacing. “I have been a spy for almost as long as you have been alive, Miss Granger. Now stop defending him and listen.”

Hermione stilled.

Severus pursed his lips as he studied her. “He has gone rogue. If he ever was loyal, he certainly is not now. Whatever he is in the process of doing, it is not solely on behalf of the Order. He is one of

the most powerful Generals in the army now. He reports only to the Dark Lord. He has his own web of informants throughout the army, and he has used that information to make the Order heavily reliant on him; likely to prevent us from ever betraying him." Hermione felt as though she couldn't breathe. Her fingertips were tingling faintly. She gave a shaky nod.

"I believe I know why he killed Gibbon," Severus added after a moment. "He concealed it and made the process look like a torture, but once I noticed the enchantment, there were several clues that made what he had been attempting obvious. Draco is trying to find a means of removing his Dark Mark without dying from it."

"Dying?"

"If the mark was possible flense or remove by chopping off the arm, Igor Karkaroff would be alive today. There were a few who tried to run or become turncoats during both wars and discovered to their detriment what happens. The mark is a connection between the Dark Lord and his servants; severing it results in a cursed wound. The person bleeds to death, unstoppably. There are no spells or potions to prevent it. Yet it seems Draco is determined to find a way, if he possibly can."

A horrifying detail struck Hermione. "He was left handed. But now he's ambidextrous."

Severus quirked an eyebrow thoughtfully. "That would be the logical thing to do, for a man intending to eventually cut off his own arm. Do you know how long he's been that way?" "As long as I've been going to him. I've rarely seen him use his left hand." There was a burning sensation in the pit of her stomach.

Severus looked pensive. "So he's been planning this for years then."

Hermione was reeling; trying to reevaluate everything she thought she knew. Draco was playing a long game. She was merely a ripple in it, or a tool. She didn't even know.

Severus stared at her, his expression more tense than Hermione had ever seen. "He would be quite deadly for everyone involved if the manacles of his servitude were ever removed."

Hermione nodded. Without the Dark Mark restricting Draco, it would no longer be necessary for him to appease the Order into maintaining his cover. If he was vying for power, getting his mark off was the next step.

Especially since Hermione had admitted that Harry didn't intend to kill Voldemort.

Severus gave a faint sigh and suddenly seemed old as he stared down at Hermione. "I'll admit, I expected the June attack to be the beginning of the end for him. With the punishment he submitted to, I assumed he'd be on borrowed time." He eyed her carefully. "That it wasn't, I suppose, must be attributed to your exceptional care."

There was a pause. For a moment it felt as though the world had frozen around her, then it shattered.

"You knew he'd take the fall for the attack in June," Hermione said slowly, staring at Severus wide-eyed. "You, Kingsley and Moody. That's why you were willing to make the attack so elaborate and use so much intelligence. You weren't concerned about exposing him. You expected he'd be killed for it."

Severus said nothing.

“Why—why didn’t you tell me?” she finally said. Her voice shook faintly with rage. “We didn’t think you needed to know.” Severus shrugged. Hermione felt so enraged she thought she might incinerate the room around her. “We expected you to realise it eventually. When it became clear that you hadn’t realised it—that you had formed some kind of attachment, or felt obligated to him—we concluded it would be advisable to let you try to heal him, given you seemed to want to. We thought it was the least we could do, after what was asked from you.”

“You expected I’d fail. That he’d be too far gone by the time I got there.”

Severus pulled a jar of fairy wings from a shelf. Hermione couldn’t breathe. Every sound seemed suddenly a hundred times louder. The bubbling of the potions. Her own quiet, horrified gasps. She could hear her rising heart rate.

“You can imagine our surprise to find that he is instead even more dangerous than before. Our spy of dubious loyalty. So tell me, what did you do to Draco Malfoy?” Hermione pressed her lips together for several seconds.

“Is that why Moody sent me? So you could ask me that?” she finally asked.

Severus said nothing.

Hermione looked away and twitched at the hem of her sleeve. “You helped poison him, right down into his soul. Runic magic is corrupting, always; it doesn’t wear off. If I’d gotten there sooner—if you’d mentioned what had happened—I might have been able to treat him less drastically. But by the time I found out, I didn’t have those options. My assignment was to hold him for as long as possible. When I spoke to Moody, he cleared me to do whatever I could. If you hadn’t wanted me to heal him, you *should* have told me.”

“And what, precisely, is it that you did?”

Hermione swallowed hard. “I saved his soul.”

“What. Did. You. Do?” Severus said slowly.

Hermione was quiet and then she reached up and fidgeted with the empty chain around her neck.

“When—when I was studying in Egypt—before I left—the hospital head gave me a Heart of Isis. He thought I might need it for Harry.”

There was a deafening silence as Severus froze mid-motion over his cauldron.

“You didn’t,” he said, his voice nearly vibrating with disbelief. “Do you know the value? If you’d sold it, you could have fed the Resistance for a decade. The closest thing to a Philosopher’s Stone and you used it on Draco Malfoy?”

Hermione didn’t blink. “I made a calculated decision. I couldn’t have put it on the black market. Can you imagine if Tom got his hands on one? In less than four months, Draco saved hundreds of people. Hundreds. And hundreds more he at least spared a horrific death. He saved Caithness, and there was nothing strategic about it. He’s not a monster.” Her voice grew bitter. “You helped poison him, and you didn’t even give me a chance to try to save him. The rescues weren’t enough. It wasn’t enough to give us a victory. We were dying by inches until he came along.”

Severus' rage felt nearly explosive. His sallow features paled further and his eyes were glittering. "He played you for a fool, and more deftly than I would have thought possible. One orphanage and a set of runes on his back and you were convinced he was worth giving a Heart of Isis to. You are more a fool than Harry Potter." He sneered at her contemptuously.

Hermione flinched. "He hasn't cut his arm off yet."

"Do you think he'll inform you before he does? He is deadly. He is not loyal to anyone, and you have empowered him to become a Dark wizard capable of reducing the Dark Lord into obscurity."
"There is more to him," Hermione said, jutting her chin up as she met Severus's eyes. "It's not as though he knew I had it when he asked for me. Or planned his punishment. You should have seen him, Severus; he knew he was going to die from them. He was resigned to it."

"Are you sure? It never occurred to you that he may have been manipulating you this entire time? After all, what exactly is he getting from having you? You aren't sleeping with him. He's teaching you to duel; he taught you occlumency. What benefit are you providing him?"

Hermione paled slightly, but she remained obstinate. "He's lonely. He doesn't have anyone. I am the closest thing to intimacy he has. I'm not the one who keeps extending our practice sessions. He knows I'm becoming a vulnerability for him, and he still can't help himself. That's how the runes work."

"You have run out of time," Severus said, his expression dismissive. "You have until the end of next month to demonstrate you have some kind of control over him. If you can't, you will turn over the most incriminating memories you have of him to Kingsley."

Hermione stared at Severus, stunned.

"You can't expose him." Her voice was shaking. "We need him. The Resistance thinks we're winning and it's because of him. Harry thinks we're winning. If we lose the intelligence, the Order won't be able to recover."

Severus was unmoved. "Fortunately for the Resistance, Draco has made himself into quite a crucial figure within the Dark Lord's army. His death will destabilise things dramatically."

"You can't—do that to him."

"Why? Because he's your—? What would you even say you are to him?"

Hermione swallowed bitterly and refused to answer the question. "He will be tortured to death in the most horrific way possible, and you know that. The curse division victims would be lucky compared to what will be done to Draco. You—can't—"

Severus turned and stared coldly down at her. "Are you refusing orders, Miss Granger? Choosing Draco Malfoy over Mr Potter and the Order?"

Hermione froze and it seemed like time stopped as she struggled to breathe. She was collapsing inward. There was nothing left inside her.

"No." Her voice was defeated. "No. I am loyal to the Order."

Severus turned away. "If he hadn't been so overconfident, he could have protected himself with a

Vow from you. Ego always is a Dark Wizard's downfall." He sneered faintly as he stirred the potion.

Hermione shook her head.

" *Go ahead. You're already more than capable of getting me killed any time you happen to feel like it."* "You're wrong. It wasn't some ego-based oversight. He's known. He's known this whole time that my memories could get him killed. He knew the Order set him up in June, even though I was too naive to. There's something else to all this, and we're missing it," she said, gripping her hands into fists until she felt her nails cut into her palms.

Severus glanced back over at her, looking saddened. "You are compromised by him. Your opinion on the matter is no longer reliable."

Hermione snarled. "It is not! Moody said I should do whatever I could to heal Draco. I followed my orders and healed him." She drew a sharp breath. "Draco wants me to stay alive. My life is, for whatever reason, important to him. Whatever else he's doing, my well-being has become an obsession for him and he resents it. He's furious about it half the time because it's interfering with whatever original plans he had, but he can't stop himself. He knows he's reaching a tipping point. I can do this. Just give me more time. Please—"

Severus was unmoved. "You've been given time. You have until the end of next month."

Hermione felt as though she were dying. Her lungs were shriveling, atrophying inside of her. "You're putting his death on my shoulders, Severus."

"You made this bed for yourself. I did everything I could to give you an exit six months ago," Severus said, looking away from her.

Hermione gave a ragged gasp.

Severus paused and added in a gentler voice. "If and when Kingsley and Moody expose Draco, we'll give you an hour to warn him; an opportunity for a more humane exit, if you wish to offer him one."

Hermione balled her hands into fists and glared at Severus. "If you think that counts as consolation, you don't know me very well." Her voice was shaking.

Severus gave no response.

A sob rose in her throat, choking her as she tried to force it down. She drew a rasping breath and turned to flee from Spinner's End.

As soon as she got past Severus' wards, she apparated.

She reappeared in Whitecroft. She always ended up there. She stood at the road and looked wistfully down the lane toward the shack that slowly bled into view.

She went and stared at the door. It was Thursday. There was no reason for her to be there on a Thursday. It would be suspicious and illogical. Draco would probably be enraged if she activated his wards on a Thursday for no reason.

She pushed the door open. Draco appeared before she had stepped into the room. He looked her up

and down carefully, and she stared at him. She had felt as though she'd been starving until she saw him.

"What are you doing here?" he finally asked.

She blinked.

"I—," she flailed for an excuse. "The skirmish on Christmas Eve. I—was worried."

He raised an eyebrow. "That was two days ago, Granger."

"I couldn't get away. We lost a lot of fighters," she said. "I had to stay in the hospital wing."

"So you came at the first opportunity." He was eyeing her with a dubious expression.

Hermione gave a small nod and walked toward him. She stared up at him, studying him, trying to find a sign of something in him. Anything. She just wanted to know what he was. "Are you alright, Draco?"

"Granger…" His tone was a warning. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing…" Her eyes dropped down to his hands. He'd touched her with those hands. He'd run his fingers through her hair and over her skin. He'd wrapped his hand around her throat, and it had aroused her.

He'd dismembered a Death Eater with those hands, killed dozens and dozens—possibly hundreds—of people she knew, assassinated Dumbledore…

He was ambidextrous, because he'd been intending for years to cut off his own arm in order to become a free agent. Someone who wouldn't need the Order to fight Voldemort for him.

She tore her eyes away from his hands.

"I just… I wanted to know that you were alright," she said, staring down at her shoes.

He stepped closer, and she looked sharply up at him. His eyes were cold. She started to back away, but he caught hold of her wrist with his left hand and jerked her firmly toward him and then crowded her into the wall until she was trapped against him.

"Since when have you worried about me?" he said with a sneer. His eyes were hard and glinting like quicksilver.

"I don't know," Hermione felt tempted to cry at the admission. He scoffed.

"And now—? You suddenly can't help yourself?"

"I just wanted to see you."

His mouth twitched. "Why?" "Because I'm afraid that someday I'll come and you won't—," her voice cracked faintly, and she twisted her captured wrist enough to wrap her fingers around his wrist.

His eyes flickered. His hand remained wrapped around her wrist, and his face was inches from hers.

He studied her for a moment, and his expression wavered; something indecipherable in it as she

stared up at him.

He drew in a short breath and gave a low laugh. “Is this goodbye then, Granger?”

Her hold tightened. “No!”

Her breath caught. She stared at him and caught his robes in her other hand as she tried to breathe. She dropped her head and rested it against his chest. He smelled like oakmoss and cedar.

She shook. “I just—wanted to see you.”

She felt his right hand come up to rest on her shoulder, and the heat of it slowly sank into her bones as his thumb lightly ran along her collarbone. She kept gripping his other wrist.

“Don’t—die, Draco.”

“What’s wrong, Granger?”

“Nothing. I just—spent a lot of time making your healing kit. It would be really ungrateful of you to die now. So—don’t.”

He gave a hollow laugh, and his hold on her shoulder tightened. Then she felt his forehead drop against the top of her head for a split second before drawing away.

“Only because you asked,” he said. The sharp edge of sarcasm seemed faint. He sounded almost bitter.

She held his wrist tighter. She wanted—

She wanted—

It didn’t matter. It didn’t matter what she wanted. It never mattered.

For Harry. For Ron. It will be worth it.

She had promised those words to herself a thousand times, but they suddenly sounded hollow.

Draco wasn’t innocent, but he didn’t deserve the penalty Voldemort would inflict for his betrayal. Easing her conscience and euthanising him would be a paltry form of reparation. She’d be a hero then, she realised bitterly. She’d exonerate herself to the world and damn herself privately. She would never forgive herself. It would be unforgivable. The guilt would eat her alive.

She hissed through her teeth as she tried to think.

“What’s wrong, Granger?” Draco asked again when she had been quiet for a minute.

“Nothing. It was just an unexpectedly bad Christmas,” she said in a tight voice.

He snorted and twisted his hand free. Stepping away, he studied her. He gave a deep sigh.

“Activating the wards is for emergencies,” he said. “Not because you’re worried or having a bad day. You’ll risk my cover, and I’ll be forced to try to guess whether it’s worth the risk of responding immediately.”

Hermione felt herself pale. *If and when Kingsley and Moody decide to expose Draco, we’ll give you*

*an hour to warn him.*

“I’m sorry. I won’t call you again unless it’s urgent,” Hermione said. He looked skeptical. “I swear it,” she said forcefully, “If I ever activate them again, it will be legitimate.”

He gave a sharp nod. “You’ve given your word, I’ll trust you to keep it.”

She gave a small nod back, and he vanished without a sound.

Hermione stayed in the shack; staring at the spot he’d disappeared from. Wondering what to do.

*Flashback 23*

**December 2002**

The next time Hermione arrived at the shack, Draco appeared wearing only trousers and a shirt. She stopped and stared in surprise.

He quirked an eyebrow and looked down at himself. “I didn’t fancy getting you tangled in my robes,” he said with a suggestive drawl.

He stared at her for a moment with narrowed eyes before gesturing her forward.

“Given that you aren’t necessarily training for skirmishes, we need to expand your combat abilities,” he began in a clipped voice. “Vampires, hags, or harpies won’t have wands, but they’re experienced when it comes to attacking Wizarding folk. They go for close attacks that are difficult to fight off. Most wizards study defense against them assuming distance, but a smart hag will get you within arm’s reach as quickly as possible. They know combat spells are difficult to perform close range. Werewolves may have wands, but most that run in packs prefer physical combat. You’re—small.” Hermione snorted, and Draco glared at her mildly. “You’re going to be at a disadvantage in any fight. You need to defend yourself creatively.”

“Alright.” Hermione gave a sharp nod.

Draco’s eyes glittered, and he loomed over her. “Now, suppose I’m a vampire. I’d be targeting the side of your neck. You don’t have a dueling partner to cover for you. While you’re fighting off a gytrash, I’ve closed in.” He stepped closer until their bodies were touching. “What would you do now?”

Hermione whipped her wand upward, but Draco was too close for her to perform the wand motion for most defensive spells. Before she could back away and cast, his hand shot out and struck her wrist sharply. Her wand flew from her fingers and slid across the floor. She turned to dive after it, but Draco’s hand closed around her wrist, and he jerked her back.

“Wandless too. Your move, Granger.” He started leaning down toward her throat as though he intended to bite it.

Her left hand shot up to shove him away, but his other hand closed around her left wrist. She tried to wrench her arms free, but his grip was relentless.

“A word of advice,” Draco said conversationally as she continued to try to tear herself free. “Don’t leave your wrists open. Once I have you by the wrist, I have a considerable advantage; this a much easier hold for me to maintain than for you to escape from. The same goes for your feet. Be careful kicking above the knee. If you get grabbed by your ankle, you’ll be on the ground in seconds. Stomping or kneeing is much better than kicking. Stomping utilises your weight. Stomp hard and go for the feet, ankles, or the side of the knees. Disabling your opponent is the key. A knee to the groin works on everything: wizards, vampires, werewolves—even hags hate it.”

Hermione tried to knee Draco, but he used his hold on her wrists to twist her away and easily sidestepped her leg. “See, once your arms are trapped, your options are limited, and mine are nearly endless depending on what I want to do to you next.”

His lecturing was getting annoying. Hermione stomped on his foot and kicked him in the shins. He hissed faintly.

“Better. But if I were a vampire, you’d be drained by now. You clearly lack aptitude for fighting dirty.”

He released her abruptly, and Hermione tore herself away and faced him. He stared at her seriously.

“Granger, if you are attacked, you will be outnumbered. Even if you aren’t outnumbered, physically speaking, you will never be as strong as most Dark creatures naturally are. They will do whatever it takes to kill you. The fight will be stacked against you in every possible regard. Do anything you can to get away.”

Hermione gave a short nod.

“Fight smart,” he said coldly. “Be devious. When your opponent is stronger than you, it is crucial to use it against them. You will never be stronger than a werewolf, but they get lost in bloodlust and attack predictably. If you utilise that knowledge, you may be able to survive it. Also,” he shot her a look, “pull your punches; this is a practice fight.”

He returned her wand to her and attacked her again. And again, and again. He was relentless, and annoyingly conversational. He’d disarm her without even using a spell, and then proceed to trip her, or twist an arm behind her back and force her into a helpless position, while relentlessly drawling what she could have done better.

Hermione grew progressively more and more irritated with him, which he noticed and seemed amused by.

“I’m a hag,” he announced with a smirk before attacking her for the twentieth time. Hermione shot off a series of stunners as she tried to stay out of his reach, but he rapidly dodged them and closed in. She tried to dive to escape him, but he caught her by the ankle. She whirled and tried to hex him, but he snatched her wand out of her hand and tossed it into a corner, and then proceeded to sit on her hips. “I would probably slit you open and start eating your organs at this point,” he noted casually, sliding a hand over her stomach. “You’re worse at this than you were at dancing, and you were an abysmal dancer.”

“I’ve never done this kind of fighting before,” Hermione said mutinously as she tried to wriggle free. “Do you have any idea how many kinds of hand-to-hand combat there are? I browsed through dozens of books, but I had no idea what type of fighting I was expected to learn.” She glared and added, “I could stab you with one of my knives now.”

He stared at her thoughtfully and then nodded. “We should use practice knives. I’ll bring a set.”

Hermione studied him in bewilderment. “Why are you in such a good mood today?”

Months of enduring his cold rage, and suddenly he was cheerful and conversational for no apparent reason.

He looked at her for a moment and then smirked. “Joie de vivre, I suppose. Or maybe I’m just unexpectedly fond of sitting on you.”

Hermione eyed him dubiously and wondered if he was high on something.

He stood up and offered her a hand. She blinked in surprise and accepted it. Then she studied him.

He was strangely happy—borderline affectionate-seeming. Hermione was not. She felt on the verge of a breakdown just looking at him.

A month. She had a month. A month to find a way to control him.

Control him. Even if she could, she had no idea how she was possibly going to demonstrate it.

*“After all, what exactly is he getting from having you? You aren’t sleeping with him. He’s teaching you to duel, he taught you occlumency. What benefit are you providing him?”*

*“What would you even say you are to him?”*

Hermione felt as though she were going to have a panic attack. She stared at Draco in despair.

“Don’t be afraid to use your elbows,” he said. “When you’re fending off close range attacks, punching won’t have much force. Elbows are hard and ideal for close attacks. Better than something as ineffective as slapping.”

“Slapping worked rather well on you,” Hermione retorted.

Draco snorted faintly. “If you’re attacking a thirteen year old, by all means, slap him.”

Hermione scowled.

“Again,” he said, after she had caught her breath.

He lunged toward her. Rather than try to bolt, she moved toward him and then side-stepped at the last minute. He pivoted and turned back, but she’d already hit him with a stinging hex and caught his ankle with a leg locker. He was too close for more spellwork. She tried to leap away but he grabbed her by the arm, knocked her wand away and dragged her to the ground with him.

Hermione kicked, scratched, and snarled as she tried to fight free, but he weighed at least fifty pounds more than her. She tried to wrench herself away, but in a minute she was entirely pinned beneath him.

“If I were a werewolf, I’d already have ripped your throat out,” he said in a low voice. His mouth was near the base of her neck, and Hermione became abruptly aware that the length of his body was pressed against hers. His breath was brushing against the sensitive skin at the juncture of her neck and shoulder. His legs were between hers, and as she kept trying to get free, she kept bucking her hips against his.

He abruptly tore himself away from her and stood up glaring. His jaw rolled slightly, and his eyes were black.

“If you’re ever fighting off a werewolf, I would not recommend doing it that way,” he said in a tight voice as he pulled out his wand and removed the leg locker jinx on his ankle.

“How should I do it?” “Use your head to break his nose, and when he lets go of your wrists, tear his eyes out,” he said stiffly. “Go for knees, groin, eyes, ankles. As previously mentioned, you’re trying to disable your assailant.”

“Right.” She picked herself up of the floor and stared wistfully at him.

“Again,” he said. He attacked her again.

By the time Hermione apparated away, she was covered in bruises. Draco had knocked her down again and again as he’d lectured her on hags’, vampires’, and werewolves’ preferred methods for attack.

She hid in the bathroom when she got back to Grimmauld Place and rubbed Murtlap Essence all over her body. She studied self-defense. She reviewed all her notes on Draco.

She didn’t know what to do. She didn’t know how to control him. She didn’t know how to prove that she could.

She didn’t know what he wanted. Her. In some way—for some reason—he wanted her. But she interfered with whatever else it was that he wanted.

She sorted through her memories exhaustively: turning them over, organising them, trying to find something to unravel.

She lay in bed at night and wondered if she were risking the war effort. Maybe she was compromised. Unreliable. Maybe Severus was right, and Draco was better off dead. Maybe if he was such a centralised figure in Voldemort’s army, getting him killed and leaving a power vacuum would be the most effective use for him. But she couldn’t reconcile it. She refused to believe it.

She curled into a tight ball and felt as though she might die from the sense of despair she felt.

Each successive week when Draco trained her, she was distracted. She went through the motions, but she was uncommitted, and Draco noticed.

“Is there any point in my training you if you aren’t even paying attention?” he asked, his expression irritated.

Hermione’s mouth twisted, and the corners of her eyes ached. She looked away from him. “I just don’t really see the point anymore.”

He stared at her for several seconds, looking faintly aghast. “I thought you didn’t want to die,” he finally said.

“If I’m ambushed by a pack of werewolves, I doubt I’ll survive it. If I do, I’ll be in so many pieces I doubt it would even matter,” she said quietly.

He shifted back and stared at her as though he were reevaluating something. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m tired,” she said, staring at the floor. “I am tired of this war. I’m tired of trying to save people and watching them die anyway, or saving them and then watching them die later. I feel like Sisyphus, trapped in a cycle for eternity. I don’t know how to get out, and I don’t know how to keep going anymore either.” Draco was quiet for a moment. “What happened to doing everything for Potter and Weasley?” His tone was tinged with disdain.

“The price keeps getting steeper. I don’t know if I can keep paying it.”

His expression tightened. “I suppose even martyrs have limits.”

Hermione gave a listless smile. “Or bad days, at least.”

She looked up at Draco, studying his reserved, mask-like expression and the intent way he watched her.

*Give in. Give in.* She urged him. She could see it in his eyes, he was so close.

But he refused to cross the line. To concede it. Whenever she tried to beckon him across it, his malice surfaced.

He was cruelest when he was vulnerable.

Perhaps if Hermione were more dogged, she could find a way to push through the pain, but he seemed to always know where to cut to hurt her most.

Whatever was holding him back—she didn’t know how to sever it. Her fingers curled, and she almost reached for him before pulling back. She drew a deep breath and forced herself to squash her despair and focus on the situation at hand.

“Right. I’m done moping,” she said, straightening.

She grabbed her wand up off the floor and got into position. He stared at her thoughtfully for a moment before suddenly lunging toward her.

She sidestepped and shoved him past her, but he caught himself and spun back. His hand caught her wrist and forced her to drop her wand. She shoved her elbow into his ribs, wrenched herself free, and dove for her wand.

She snatched her wand up as she jumped back to her feet and managed to hit him several times before he closed in again. He grabbed her by the arm and tore her wand out of her hand again. She attempted to hook her foot behind his ankle, but he swept back and dodged it as he twisted her arm behind her. She jerked it loose with a quick lunge, and felt a flash of triumph before realising he’d let her go. Using the force from her escape, he spun her, caught her ankle with his own foot, and slammed her to the ground.

Hermione twisted, trying to wriggle free, but he had her wrists locked in his hands. Hissing slightly with frustration, she stilled while he knelt over her. “You’re still trying to win by being quick rather than by being clever,” he scolded.

He released her wrists and stood. “Again.”

Hermione was getting tired, but she still managed to last longer. She knocked him down twice, but she couldn’t outlast him. As he tried to pin her down, she spun to the side using his momentum, and they rolled across the floor.

He still ended up on top of her in the end. She nearly cursed with frustration. “Better,” he said, panting. His face was less than an inch from hers, and he was staring down at her. His hands were wrapped around her wrists over her head.

She could feel his heartbeat.

It was January 21st. Next week would be the last time, and she was due to hand her memories over to Kingsley. Draco, who worried about her more than anyone else did. Who had devoted time he couldn't possibly have trying to train her and keep her alive. Because he just wanted her to be alive.

Since he'd told her she could say no, he had never actually asked for anything from her. As he looked down at her, his expression was closed, but his eyes were intent; as though he were memorising her. Then his expression flickered, a flash of familiar bitterness.

And she knew.

He was waiting for her to betray him. He knew that she would. That she would always choose the Order first.

That was the thing that had always held him back.

He'd anticipated it since the very beginning, before the possibility had occurred to her. And he'd trained her anyway.

She couldn't understand it. What was the point to any of it if he expected to be killed by the Order? By her?

She stared at him. She didn't need a book to tell her what the expression on his face was. She could feel it, it was a heat in her abdomen, a catching sensation in her chest, and a thrum in her veins. The intensity with which he studied her. His fingers were wrapped around her wrists, and his thumb slid subconsciously along her inner arm as he looked down at her.

He drew closer. She held her breath. Then his expression hardened. He pulled his hands away and started to get up.

Hermione's hands shot out, she grabbed hold of his shirt, dragged him back and pressed her lips against his.

It was not a slow, sweet kiss. It was not a kiss caused by alcohol or insecurity.

It was borne from rage, despair, and desire so hot it threatened to burn her into oblivion.

It was possibly a kiss goodbye.

*If and when Kingsley and Moody decide to expose Draco, we'll give you an hour to warn him.*

Draco froze when her lips touched his, and she thought he might just shove her away. She felt his hand on her shoulder and braced herself as she deepened the kiss and tightened her grip on his clothes.

He wavered.

It was like something broke inside of him. Like a dam bursting, and suddenly Hermione was drowning in him. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her savagely. The heat was like wildfire.

The tension, the waiting. Months of expecting him to move on her. After being told it was why she was sent, a maiden tribute for his services.

But it had been a ruse on his part. Touching her, kissing her, “wanting” her. A feint to conceal his true intentions and motive. Demanding her had been the same form of misdirection that he’d taught her to use in occlumency.

A lie—

Until it suddenly wasn’t.

She’d shifted herself in his estimation. Manipulated her way into occupying the very place he’d pretended she held.

She slid her fingers across his shoulders. One of his hands gripped her hair, tugging at the braids, while his other hand reached down and wrenched her shirt open, shoving her bra out of the way. He palmed her breasts hard enough to make her hiss against his mouth. She kissed him deeply as her fingers slid through his hair and along the tendons of his neck. She dragged her nails across the top of his shoulders. Despite how cold he acted, his name was apt; he was a dragon. He kept walls of ice around himself, but there was fire in his heart. They tore each other’s clothes off. His shirt lost several buttons as she ripped it open and then bit down on his shoulder. Feeling him, marking him. His body was familiar to her. She had already memorised its contours.

He dragged his hands up her body, along the curves he’d laughed at and dismissed as scrawny. He kissed across her breasts and tangled his fingers in her braids, pulling her hair until she whimpered and tilted her head back.

His mouth was at the juncture of her neck and shoulder, and he kissed and nipped along her collarbone until he reached a point where she moaned gutturally and arched against him.

It was fast. Harsh. It wasn’t a romance between them, but the collision of two opposing forces.

He pushed her legs apart and sank into her with a single, hard thrust. Then he paused and kissed her before he started to move.

Hermione bit back a cry of pain and forced herself not to stiffen or pull away.

It hurt.

She had known it might, if not done slowly. But the pain still caught her off guard. The abruptness of it. Perhaps he’d assumed there had been others before him.

She was glad it hurt. She was whoring herself for the war. She had seduced Draco after he’d made it abundantly clear it was a line he didn’t want crossed. She’d manipulated him because she wanted something from him.

It should hurt her physically to do it, the same way it hurt her mentally.

He was so much bigger his frame practically enveloped her. His hands were tangled in her hair so tightly she could barely even twitch her head as he met her eyes and moved inside of her. His jaw was tensed. His expression shielded the way it almost always was. That hard flat line of his mouth. But his eyes… the intensity in them as he looked at her was searing. In that expression, she could tell— He was hers.

The realisation broke her heart somewhat.

She forced herself not to show any signs of discomfort. She moved her hips to meet his movement and clenched around him as she dragged her fingernails across his back. She locked her feet below his hips to drive him further in. He hissed and dropped his head against her shoulder as he thrust deep inside of her. The angle of his movement, the intensity between them wasn't just his—she whimpered and gasped near his ear.

His pace faltered slightly, and he lifted his head. He slid his hands out of her hair, caught hold of her hands and entwined their fingers. He kissed her. Soul-searing kisses that made her chest hurt as she returned them.

He shifted his pace. Slower. The angle was different, the way their pelvises met as he pushed into her, and Hermione realised with alarm that it was tearing her sense of control away from her. Dragging her upward into fire she didn't know how to escape from or rein in.

Draco was kissing her. Hot. Bruising. Almost punishing kisses, as he gripped her hands and kept driving into her. The pain had dulled to a fainter throb amid the fire of sensation that laced its way through her nerves.

Several more, hard, deep strokes, then Draco's hips jerked, and he gave a deep moan and dropped his head down next to hers. His breath dragged across her skin as he panted near her ear and kissed her shoulder.

Hermione lay still beneath him. She was suddenly aware of the rough floorboards biting into her skin. That the room was cold. The only thing she could think of was how relieved she was that she hadn't come.

Draco stayed pressed against her and still inside her for several seconds and then he abruptly tensed and pulled away. His expression was drawn, and he didn't even look at her as he snatched his clothing off the floor. He pulled his pants and trousers on.

Hermione slowly sat up, watching him carefully. He was growing progressively paler and paler as he redressed. His expression was both disbelieving and horrified.

"Fuck— " he said under his breath, dragging his hand through his hair.

He seemed strangely devastated.

He clapped his hand over his mouth and looked over, meeting her eyes. Whatever was dawning on him seemed to be giving him a panic attack.

He swallowed visibly, closed his eyes and pulled on his shirt. Then he opened his eyes. He seemed to have composed himself. He drew a deep breath and turned to her. His expression was tense.

As he looked at her, his eyes dropped to her legs and he blanched white.

"You were a virgin?" His voice was rasping.

Hermione glanced down. There was blood on her thighs. "Yes," she said. "When you first gave your terms, it was assumed that was how you'd want me."

Malfoy looked like he was about to be sick. His jaw was clenched as he just kept staring at her. "I—" his voice failed him.

“I—would have been gentler—if I had known,” he finally said. Hermione pressed her knees together to hide it and drew her legs closer to her body. “I didn’t really want you to be.”

He pressed his lips together. He looked strangely lost.

She couldn’t understand how it added up. Why giving in and fucking her was somehow a decisive stroke.

Maybe it was. After he’d kissed her when they were both drunk, there had been a distinct line he’d drawn. One that he’d been furiously assiduous about maintaining.

If he’d expected her to kill him in the end, he may have found the idea of crossing it unbearable. But it didn’t explain everything else he’d done. If he expected her to sell him out, why climb? Why try to remove the Dark Mark?

It had to be related to the runes. If he’d been torn, and he’d clearly been torn, then it may have tipped the scales. Maybe he couldn’t change course now. It was set. Obsessive. Possessive. She had him; possibly forever, if she was cunning enough to use it.

There was something ironic about seducing someone in the hope it might somehow save their life. Her mouth quirked faintly at the corner.

She gripped her knee; her hands were shaking faintly.

She’d gotten what she wanted. She’d grieve over the cost later, when she had space for it. She slammed her occlumency walls into place. She wasn’t going to think about anything but the immediate situation.

She had him. For whatever reason, she had him. Now she had to find a way to take advantage of it.

He noticed her expression. “You seem pleased,” he said in a bitter voice, his lip curling, “to have successfully whored yourself. Happy to know you’ve got your chess piece locked in place?”

She didn’t flinch at the insult. She closed her hands slowly into fists and then forced herself to open them. “That was my job,” she said quietly. There was no point in trying to deny it. “You have to have known that was my mission.” “Of course,” he said in an empty tone, looking away from her. His arms were hanging limp, and as though he suddenly didn’t know what to do with himself. “I just—I never thought you’d actually succeed. I didn’t want you—when I demanded you—I didn’t actually want you.” “I know.” She looked away. “I realised that everything at the beginning was an act.” Her skin was hurting from the cold. The shack had never been heated, but she hadn’t realised how cold it was until then.

He gave a choked laugh under his breath as he looked back at her. “Of course.”

There was a pause. Hermione started pulling her clothes on. Draco looked away.

“I wasn’t going to betray your Order,” he finally said in a dead voice. “I was never going to. You were already losing when I came, and you’re probably still going to lose now. But—I never really cared. I didn’t turn because of that. I wanted to avenge my mother. I was perfectly willing to die in the process.” He stared down at the floor. “Unfortunately, by the time I had an opportunity to offer my services, she had been dead too long. It wasn’t a ‘plausible’ explanation.” The bitterness on his face was unadulterated. He rolled his jaw and looked up at the ceiling, tilting his head back. “I

wasn't aware there was a time limit on grief."

He looked over at her, and his expression grew vicious and disdainful. His eyes were glittering. "Since that wasn't a plausible reason, I had to come up with something I'd ostensibly want from the Order. So—a pardon. But I knew that would hardly be believable either. I knew I'd need a contact; choosing a girl and acting like I had some sort of interest seemed like a pragmatic solution. A way to play into the Death Eater narrative." He gave a thin smile. "But most witches in the Resistance were too much of a risk; hot-headed and out in the field so often there was a good chance they'd get picked up in a skirmish, and I'd either get my cover blown or I'd be cycling through contacts constantly."

He swallowed and his mouth twisted. "Then I remembered you. I thought for years that you'd died, but Snape reported you were the Order's healer. When you occurred to me, I thought I'd found the perfect solution. You were kept in safe houses; there wouldn't be much risk of you being picked up or killed, and you were pragmatic enough that you'd go along if you thought you were saving your friends. It *seemed* like the perfect solution. When I said my terms were you and a pardon, they immediately bought it. Apparently the 'now and after war' line was absurd enough that you all found it believable." He sneered. "As if I would have betrayed the Dark Lord for a chance to own you," he said, rolling his eyes. "I knew they'd send you with instruction to try to make me fall for you—to assure my services and ensure I wouldn't tire of you or change my mind. But—I figured, you'd been such a bitch back in school, and you'd hate me so much for killing Dumbledore, I was sure you wouldn't succeed. I honestly thought it would be funny to see you try."

He stared down at the floor.

"But you did—you outmanoeuvered me," he said. "Or maybe I was just too tired and grieving to keep pushing you away. It hardly matters. You won." He sank down against the wall and shut his eyes. Hermione studied him skeptically as she pulled the rest of her clothes back on. She wasn't sure what angle he was trying to play with this—concession? Confession?

The part about her was believable enough. It fit with everything she'd noted about him. But she was doubtful of his claim that his mother was his true impetus. She'd considered the possibility countless times and dismissed it.

"Really? You switched sides because your mother died?" She snorted loudly with disbelief as she stood up. "Her death was hardly your master's fault. And what? Before that you just ascended his ranks by accident? Didn't really notice for five years and then oh—golly, what? The anniversary of her death passed, and you got so melancholy you couldn't help but reach out to us?" She was baiting him. She was sure it would piss him off. Maybe—if she goaded him enough, he'd actually tell the truth for once. His eyes snapped open, and he grew pale with rage. "Fuck you, Granger."

Hermione flinched. The skin on her back and shoulders felt scratched raw in places, and her lower abdomen ached faintly. She could feel his semen pooling in the fabric of her knickers, and there was a stinging sensation between her legs. She swallowed and forced herself to ignore it. "You are a Death Eater," she said coolly, crossing her arms as she stared down at him. "Do you expect me to forget what you've done? To imagine you became so high ranking because of that delightful personality of yours? You killed Dumbledore. You've murdered my friends. You torture people to death. And what? You think invoking your mother changes that? It's not a matter of having an expiration date on grief. If you expect us to believe you blame it on your master, perhaps you

shouldn't have spent an extra year supporting him before deciding to come around to our side. After you started this war. After you *chose* to become a Death Eater." He stared at her, his face twisted with fury as he reached down and ripped open the sleeve covering his left arm. Exposing the stark, black tattoo there. "Do you even know why I have this?" he asked, his teeth flashing as he sneered at her. "Did you ever stop to think why?"

He stood up and stalked across the room toward her. "After you and your friends had my father thrown into Azkaban, the Dark Lord went to my house." Hermione's eyes widened as he continued. "I wasn't even home from school yet. When I got there, he was waiting for me. He had my mother in a cage, in our drawing room. He'd been torturing her for nearly two weeks." His breathing was ragged and uneven. "Do you think it's a choice when the Dark Lord tells you to take his mark? You sold yourself to save the people you care about. Well, so did I. Did you expect me fail intentionally as a Death Eater when I wasn't even the one who would suffer for it? Killing Dumbledore and climbing the ranks was the only way to get her out." Hermione felt herself grow pale. "I didn't know." His jaw was trembling as he glared down at her. "After she died, I was being watched. The Dark Lord isn't a fool, he knew I'd waver after losing her. I had to re-earn his trust before I could risk doing anything. I'm not one of your friends. If I wanted my betrayal to matter, he couldn't anticipate it. If I'd reached out to the Order the next weekend, do you really think there would have been any question about who the spy was? It took time to get close enough to actually know anything important." He turned away and his voice grew thick and hoarse. "She—she never recovered. The tremors—they never stop, not after that much cruciatus. I don't even know what else he did to her—before I got there—," his voice broke. He shoved his hair away from his face and seemed to be struggling to breathe. "The whole summer—I couldn't… I couldn't do anything but tell her I was sorry."

Draco turned away and leaned against a wall as though he were about to fall. "He kept her in the cage for months; she was still in it when I returned to school. After I killed Dumbledore, he let her out. But then he stayed and lived in the manor with us. She could barely handle it. She'd fall apart at any sound and just cower on the floor panicking."

He was breathing so rapidly his hands were shaking, and he kept talking, the words just pouring from him. "My mother—she—she was never very strong. She nearly died when she was pregnant with me, and she never recovered from it. She—was always fragile after that. My father always said we had to take care of her. He made me swear, again and again growing up, that I'd always take care of her. When the Dark Lord finally left the manor—I tried to get her away; somewhere he couldn't find her or hurt her again. But she wouldn't go —she wouldn't go anywhere without me."

He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. "I was trying to take care of her. I was trying to keep her safe. I was trying to figure out a way to run—and then—she was burned to death in Lestrange Manor—" His voice broke away, and he slid down the wall, shuddering.

Hermione felt something in her heart twist.

He'd always been fiercely protective of his mother, even in school. When anyone insulted his father he might get angry, but the faintest insinuation against his mother made him vicious. The shocking transformation from school bully into a murderer capable of killing Albus Dumbledore suddenly made sense. Voldemort had dropped him into a crucible with the option of emerging a weapon or losing the only person he cared about; a person he felt intensely responsible for. Caring for Narcissa Malfoy had forged his deadliness; that cold ability to calculate and push the limits. "I'm so sorry,

Draco.” she said, feeling faint with shock. “I don’t want your false sympathy, Granger,” he snarled, but his voice was shaking. He had probably never told anyone what had happened. Severus hadn’t known. His friends couldn’t have known. He’d been carrying it for years, trying to make amends as best he could. Then Hermione had come along and slowly and unrelentingly manipulated him into caring for someone else—into caring for her.

No wonder he had been devastated to realise it. “I’m not lying,” she said. “I’m sorry. I am truly sorry for what happened to her. And—I’m sorry I did this to you.” She drew closer to him. He looked so alone.

She placed a tentative hand on his arm, half expecting him to fling her across the room in rage. But after a moment's hesitation, he dropped his head down onto her shoulder. She pulled him into her arms; he stiffened for a moment and then gripped her shoulders and sobbed. She’d never expected to see him cry.

“I can’t—I can’t—,” he kept repeating the words as he shook.

Hermione didn’t know what to do. She stroked her fingers through his hair and along the back of his neck as he kept repeating the words over and over again.

“I can’t—I can’t do this again—,” he gasped. “I can’t care for someone again. I can’t—I can’t take it.”

Hermione rested a hand on his cheek and felt his tears slide across her skin and down her wrist.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry, Draco.” She said the words again and again. She was apologising for everything.

For the first time, Draco Malfoy was fully human to her. She’d slipped through his walls and peeled away his defensive layers of malice and cruelty, until she reached the centre of him, and there found he carried a broken heart.

She could use that.

*Flashback 24*

**January 2003**

When Draco stopped crying, Hermione withdrew her hand from his face, sat back and studied him soberly.

His expression grew guarded and bitter as he looked back at her.

Her other hand was still on his shoulder. They stared at each other in silence for several minutes. Even the air between them felt raw.

She had him. She'd done what she'd been ordered to do. But she had no idea how she could demonstrate it to Moody or Kingsley. How on earth was she supposed to demonstrate that she controlled him?

"If you're loyal to the Order, why keep climbing rank?" she finally asked.

His eyes were like mirrors. His expression mask-like again. He smirked at her. "It was obvious that my offer was only accepted out of desperation. The Order of the Phoenix as an organisation may be bound to keep its word, but Moody and Shacklebolt are strategists. Claiming they could get me pardoned if the Order won was almost laughable. I assumed that once I outlived my usefulness, you'd blow my cover so that the Order could take advantage of the disorder following my death. Therefore," his mouth twisted. "I tried to position myself in order of maximise the potential fallout."

Hermione's hand on his shoulder tightened.

"Why kill Gibbon?"

His eyes narrowed. "I was wrapping up unfinished business. He'd offered suggestions for how my mother should be punished."

"So you dismembered him?"

Draco's expression was suddenly cold as ice. "How many spies do you have?"

"None with as much access as you. Why did you dismember Gibbon?"

He was silent for several seconds. "I wanted to see if I could get his Dark Mark off. I tried to find a way to do it before my mother died. Since I was killing him anyway, I decided to try again. It didn't work though. I can't find a way to get the fucking thing off." Hermione stared at him doubtfully for several seconds. Whole truth? Half truth? She wasn't sure.

"Why kiss me?" he abruptly asked. "What was the point—in all this?"

Hermione's eyes dropped for a moment; when she looked up, he was still studying her.

"I didn't know—that you were supposed to die from your runes. Apparently it was obvious, but I

didn’t realise it.”

Draco laughed. It was dead-sounding. “They didn’t expect me to succeed in healing you. Once it became clear that you weren’t dying, and you were continuing to climb rank and appeared to be trying to remove your Dark Mark, the Order concluded that you were trying to position yourself to overthrow your master. That you had been aiding the Order simply to play both sides against each other because you want to be the next Dark Lord.”

He gave another quiet, dead-sounding laugh. “Did you think so too?”

“No, I didn’t. But because I healed you, I am regarded as compromised. I—I’m—no longer —I’m not—my opinions are no longer considered reliable. I was given until the end of the month to demonstrate I could control you. I think—” Hermione gave her own bitter laugh. “I think it was just their way of letting me say goodbye.”

“So that was a goodbye fuck? Payment for services rendered?” His mouth curved into a sneer.

“No. It was—” Hermione’s jaw trembled, and her eyes dropped away. “I—it was—that wasn’t what it was.”

Her fingers twisted in the fabric of his robes and she stared at him. “Why didn’t you have me make an Unbreakable Vow when I offered?”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “I wasn’t interested in not being betrayed by you simply because I made you incapable of it. After all, I’m sure Shacklebolt and Moody have more than enough to damn me without you.”

Hermione gave a short nod. She felt as though there were something lodged in her throat. She looked away for a moment and then back into his eyes. “I can’t—I can’t choose you over the Order. There—are so many people relying on us. Britain’s all that’s left of the Resistance. I can’t choose you over all Muggle-borns. There’s nothing—there’s no hope for them if the Order loses.”

“I know.” His voice was clipped. His eyes glittered as he stared at her, his expression vicious, almost mocking.

That was all he said.

Her hold on his robes loosened, and she gave a disbelieving laugh. He didn’t even want to live. He wanted revenge; he wanted to die. Caring for her was a disappointing twist for him—it wasn’t enough to make him want to live.

She’d just made it worse. That was all she’d done.

Because Severus and Moody and Kingsley hadn’t told her. They’d made her think it was real. That it was forever.

So she’d play her part convincingly.

But it didn’t matter—it never mattered, because Draco had always known.

She tried to breathe as she absorbed it.

She opened her mouth and then closed it. Draco smirked and looked away from her.

“Alright,” she finally said mechanically, nodding faintly. She felt as though she’d been knifed; reality cold as tempered steel had been driven in and dragged through her core, and she was left to bleed to death from it.

She swallowed.

“They said—” her voice broke, “they said they’d let me warn you, before they expose you. I will come. I’m sorry.”

He didn’t react. Not even a flicker. He was just cold.

She looked up at him, taking in all the details of him that she had memorised; his hair and sharp cheekbones, the intensity of his eyes, his thin lips and straight white teeth, the precise lines of his jaw, and his pale throat disappearing in the black collar of his shirt. The fabric was twisted; she reached out and straightened it. “I am—so so sorry, Draco.”

She withdrew her hand and started to turn away. There was no air in the room. She kept trying to breathe, and there wasn’t any oxygen at all.

She thought she might faint.

“So, what happens to you, Granger, after you choose the Order?” Draco’s voice casually interrupted her.

Hermione blinked and turned her head back. “Me?”

“Yes,” Draco caught her chin and tilted her face up toward his so that she was looking into his cool silver eyes. They were narrowed as he studied her. “What happens to you?”

“If you—die?”

He gave a short nod. Hermione hadn’t even considered the question. Her focus had been on trying to find a way to keep Draco alive past January. She hadn’t even given thought to what she would do next if she failed.

“I don’t know,” she said with a short hysterical laugh. She pulled her chin free. “They already mostly replaced me in the hospital wing.” She shrugged, spreading her hands. “Maybe they’ll just offer me to the next spy they recruit.”

“Don’t joke. I want a real answer.” His voice had an edge of fury to it.

Hermione looked back up at him and scoffed. “I promised myself to you, Draco. I swore it. Now and after the war. I didn’t make anymore plans.”

His expression flickered as he looked back at her, and then hardened. “I thought you didn’t want to die; surely there is something you’re looking forward to.”

She smiled bitterly. “I don’t—have anything left. I’m spent now.”

Draco was silent. Hermione pressed her lips together and started to stand. She wanted to leave. The room was growing vaguely luminous.

“I’ll swear an Unbreakable Vow,” he said abruptly. “Whatever damn thing Moody wants. Would that qualify as a sufficient demonstration of control?” Hermione looked back at him sharply. His

expression was cold, but his eyes burned as she met them.

“You would do that?” she asked, disbelieving.

He looked exhausted, but there was an edge of something still seething in him. “Let Moody know. I assume he’s still willing to act as Bonder.”

Hermione nodded slowly, still staring at him in wide-eyed disbelief. He sighed and reached up and brushed across her throat, his thumb ghosting along the side of her neck. Hermione felt her breath catch.

“Why? Why offer?” she asked, studying him.

He snorted and withdrew his hand. “I realise now, I didn’t take everything into account. It didn’t occur to me I may have made you marketable.”

He looked away from her.

“Oh,” Hermione said.

*The Malfoys are closer to being dragons than they are wizards. They do not share. They are obsessive about what they regard to be theirs.*

She felt tempted to laugh. She swallowed hard. “Alright then.” There was something else she should say. “I’ll—I’ll let Moody know.”

He gave a short nod of acknowledgement.

He didn’t say a word as she stood up and gathered her satchel. His hand twitched forward as she turned to walk away. He didn’t look at her as she stepped through the doorway. When she pulled the door closed, he was still leaning against the wall, staring blankly at the floor, so pale he could have been a ghost.

Hermione stood outside in the rain for several minutes trying to regain her bearings. She drew a ragged breath.

She felt as though she were on the edge of a precipice, and she still wasn’t sure if she was going to fall from it.

She took another deep breath and apparated to Spinner’s End. The windows of the house were dark. She sat on the step in front of the door.

She was soaked to the bone when the door behind her abruptly opened.

Severus stared down at her with a cold expression. She huddled away.

“Is there a reason you’re endeavoring to contract pneumonia on my doorstep?”

Hermione stood up and looked at him. There was rainwater streaming down her face. “Wizarding folk are immune to pneumonia.”

He rolled his eyes and opened the door wider. “I’ll assume this is urgent. Given your lack of invitation.” Hermione cast a drying charm on herself as she stepped through the door and followed Severus into his sitting room.

He flicked his wand carelessly and started a roaring fire in the hearth without glancing at her. Then he began gathering up strewn books; there were piles on the sofa and armchairs. He started returning them to the crammed shelves where they belonged.

Hermione's hands were aching with cold, and she held them out toward the flames for several moments before she spoke.

"It was Narcissa," she finally said. "She was the reason."

"Really?" Severus' skeptical voice came from somewhere behind her.

"Tom had her in a cage when Draco returned from school after fifth year. She wasn't let out until Draco killed Dumbledore. Is it true that she nearly died when she was pregnant?"

There was a pause. Hermione listened to the sliding sounds of book covers shifting against each other and the faint thump as the books bumped the back of the shelves. "It is," Severus said after a moment. "It happened near the height of war. Lucius believed he was going to lose her. Even after Draco was born, there was a period when he wasn't sure she'd survive."

Hermione nodded. "Draco said Lucius made him swear he'd always take care of her. He said he tried to send her somewhere safe, but she wouldn't leave without him. Did any marked Death Eaters die suspiciously, the way Gibbon did, back before Lestrange Manor burned down?"

The sound of reshelving stopped.

"Now that you mention it, there were several who disappeared. Travers, Pettigrew, and Jugson most notably." Severus' voice was on the other side of the sitting room.

Hermione stared into the fire. "He was trying to find a way to get the mark off so he could run with her. Spying was always just revenge."

Severus said nothing and continued reshelving. Hermione wondered if he believed her.

Compromised. Unreliable. He probably thought she was just there to beg.

"He said he'll make an Unbreakable Vow; whatever Moody wants."

There was silence. Then a hand wrapped around her shoulder, and Severus turned her suddenly to face him. His onyx eyes glittered in the firelight. He appeared to be taking in her appearance for the first time. His expression was aghast.

"What did you do?"

Hermione looked up at him, her gaze steady. "I accomplished my mission: I made him loyal."

Severus touched the side of her head. Her braids had been pulled apart and the sections hung haphazardly. She flushed and jerked her head away from his hand. His hold on her shoulder tightened, and he herded her further into the light, tilted her head back and stared at her, his nostrils flaring.

Hermione didn't want to be looked at. She tried to twist away. "Can I use your bathroom? I couldn't go back to Grimmauld Place like this, and I didn't—I didn't have anywhere else to go."

Severus' hand on her shoulder tightened for a moment, as though he were hesitating. His mouth was

pressed into a hard line, then he started to speak as his eyes darted down over her again.

Hermione turned her head away to avoid watching his face, hunching her shoulders and curling defensively inward. His hand on her shoulder released, and he slowly stepped back, gesturing down the hallway.

Hermione turned without a word, and walked out of the sitting room into the small bathroom near the kitchen. As she locked the door, she stared in the mirror; she looked so pale she was nearly grey, but her lips were reddened and bruised. Her braids looked like a bird's nest. Her shirt was torn; she hadn't noticed it when she had been redressing.

She shoved her trousers and knickers down and banished the mixture of blood and semen collected there. It had grown cold against her skin, and she hadn't been able to ignore it. Not in the shack. Not in rain waiting for Severus. It was just there, as a cold reminder against her flesh.

Her hands were shaking almost violently as she jerked her trousers back up. She repaired the tear in her shirt and then reached up to remove the hairpins still holding up her hair.

Her lips were trembling, and the corners of her eyes pricked as she rapidly unbraided her hair and then carefully braided each side. She was not going to cry. She was not. She kept repeating the resolution. She tried to occlude everything she didn't want to think about, but the walls wouldn't stay. She bit her lip as she coiled the long braids carefully at the base of her neck and repinned them.

She stared at her reflection again. She was thinner than she'd been when she'd first seen Draco in March. Her cheeks were hollowed, and her collarbones stuck out starkly. She bruised easily.

Stress had carved her away, bit by bit.

She reached into her satchel and pulled out a small jar of Murtlap essence, spreading it across her lips she watched the colour slowly fade away. Then she dabbed at a few spots along her neck.

She walked back out of the bathroom. Severus was in the kitchen; there were several small cauldrons bubbling. When he turned and saw her, he immediately snatched up a several vials and came toward her.

"Take these," he ordered.

Hermione looked at the vials placed in her hands. Draught of Peace to make her hands stop shaking, a contraceptive potion, and a pain relief potion.

"I don't need this one," she said, handing the contraceptive back. "I've already been taking it."

Severus' expression barely rippled as he took it back and slipped it into a pocket.

"What happened?" Severus asked after she downed the Draught of Peace. His tone was softly murderous.

Hermione avoided his piercing gaze and unstoppered the pain relief potion. "I don't know why you're upset. Didn't you expect this to eventually happen from the very beginning?" Severus was silent for several moments. "I've been on call, the evening you first went, and every Tuesday morning until my shift in the labs." "Oh. I didn't know that." She glanced around the room, wondering why no one had told her. Then again, apparently they didn't tell her anything. A useful

tool.

She had thought Severus at least had regarded her as more than that. She pressed her lips together.

There was small barrel of Dragon Claw Ooze on the worktop; she stepped over and looked at it. It was Peruvian Vipertooth: expensive, good for restorative potions, strengtheners, and gave an additional kick to pepper-up when dealing with Black Cat Flu.

She removed the cork and sniffed it.

“Hermione, what happened?”

She stilled and replaced the cork. Severus almost never called her by her first name.

She looked over at him coolly, but her jaw trembled uncontrollably. “I told you he wanted me. Today he gave in.”Her eyes dropped away. “It was just—abrupt. He didn’t know that I—hadn’t—before. I was afraid if he knew, he’d stop. Last time—when he kissed me and I—hesitated—he—he didn’t come back for over a month. So I couldn’t let on. I was afraid he’d never come back if I did.”

Severus said nothing.

Hermione pressed her hand against her collarbones. “He was so upset afterward, I thought he might actually faint. Then everything just poured out of him. I don’t think he‘s ever told anyone before. He started crying when he told me about Narcissa. He’s been waiting for us to sell him out. That’s why he kept climbing; he figured the more important he was, the greater the blow for Tom when he died.”

There was a silence punctuated only by the faint bubbling of the cauldrons.

Hermione didn’t know where to look. She didn’t know what to do. She could feel Severus staring at her, his eyes skeptical.

Compromised. Unreliable. She bit her lip and turned away.

After a minute Severus gave a low sigh. Hermione looked back at him, her heart rate shooting upward.

“If he’s suicidal, why is he offering to make an Unbreakable Vow?” Severus’ expression was unreadable.

Hermione’s mouth twitched, and she twisted the edge of her shirt in her hands. “Well, now that he can’t deny the obsession to himself, I don’t think he knows how to let go of it. Now that he’s given in. I don’t think he has any kind of moderation in how possessive he is, even before he got the runes. I may not have made an Unbreakable Vow, but I swore myself to him. He regards me as his. I think—I think that’s what changed things.” Hermione looked away, twisting her fingers in her hands. “Will you—will you tell Moody? I don’t think he believes anything I say now. But—I did what I was told to. So, you shouldn’t—you can’t— don’t make me—” Her hands started shaking again.

“I’ll speak to Moody,” Severus said. “You did enough. I didn’t expect that you would—” his voice faded for a moment. “If he agreed to make the Unbreakable Vow, that is more than enough.”

Hermione nodded repeatedly, glancing blindly around the room. “Alright. Alright. I’ll go then.”

“You will wait,” Severus said firmly.

Hermione stood, feeling awkward and out of place, and he stared at her and seemed on the verge of saying something. He reached towards her but stopped when he got within an inch of her shoulder. He curled his hand into a fist and withdrew it, still peering down at her.

“Are—” he blinked and started again, “Would—”

Severus appeared to be at a loss for words for the first time in his life. His mouth twitched repeatedly.

“Do you—wish to…” he trailed off for a moment. “Do you want to talk about—it?”

Hermione stared at him, horrified. “No.”

He looked visibly relieved, gave a short nod and glanced around the kitchen. “You’re not injured—are you? Do you need me to—”

“He wasn’t violent,” she said sharply, cutting off Severus’ question. She folded her arms around herself and jerked her head. Her voice was very tight, as though her throat couldn’t relax. “It was just—abrupt.”

Severus looked down and straightened the cuffs of his robes for several seconds. Then he turned sharply and swept over to the cauldrons, flicking his wand over several and then swirling their contents with the stirring rods. He peered down at them.

He waved his wand, summoned a set of vials from a cabinet and ladled the potions into the vials, stoppering them all with practiced ease. Severus turned toward her and his expression flickered, revealing a grief that Hermione had only ever caught glimpses of.

He walked toward Hermione and stopped less than a foot in front of her.

There was pause. He looked down and shuffled the vials in his hands. “These should relieve any residual discomfort from the—breaching.”

Hermione felt her face grow hot and stared at the potions in his hands. She recognized them. Expensive pain relief. “It’s not—that bad,” she said, avoiding his eyes. “Besides—I can make my own potions, Severus.”

His expression grew cold. “You are allowed to have other people care for you. I know you well enough to know you wouldn’t make these potions for yourself, because too many of the ingredients are imported. Take them, unless you prefer I send word to Minerva about what you did today.”

At the threat, Hermione snatched the vials out of his hands and shoved them into her satchel. She looked up to find Severus still staring down at her. His expression was unreadable.

“What is it?” “Are you alright?” His voice was soft.

Hermione stood staring at him. No. She wasn’t. She hadn’t been in—she didn’t know when she’d last been alright. She didn’t know how to be alright anymore.

Severus’ expression was visibly concerned, and it made Hermione flinch and bristle inwardly. She

had parents. Parents who were alive and happy, even if they wouldn't ever remember having a daughter. She had parents. She didn't need new ones. She didn't need more people who 'cared' for her by telling her she was making the wrong decisions. She already had Minerva, Harry, and most of the Weasley Family doing that.

"I'm fine," she said stiffly. "I wasn't trying to make it seem like I did anything monumental. I just needed a bathroom so I could fix my hair."

He sighed. "You—" He hesitated and fell silent.

"What?" she asked, her throat contracting with dread when he stayed silent and just kept staring at her with an expression of conflict in his eyes.

Was it not enough? Maybe an Unbreakable Vow still wouldn't be enough. Was there something else she could do? She swallowed repeatedly and tried to think, twisting the strap of her satchel tightly around her fingers. Maybe—

"You are without a doubt the most exceptional asset the Order possesses. I am sorry for that."

Hermione's hands stilled, and she stared at him for a moment. Then she choked and burst into tears.

He stood watching her cry for a several minutes before hesitantly resting a hand on her shoulder.

The next week, Moody accompanied Hermione to Whitecroft.

They stood together silently in the rain until the door swung open, and the shack slowly bled into view.

Draco stood framed in the door, staring at her. Hermione walked toward him, the uneven tread of Moody's steps behind her. When she reached the steps, she paused and looked up at Draco.

He didn't meet her eyes as he stepped back to give them space to enter.

He looked gaunt. Tired. But she could feel his gaze on her.

If Moody had any reaction to the shack, it was not visible in his expression. He glanced around at the walls and then studied the floor for a strangely long time.

Hermione looked down; as her eyes swept across the room she noticed with horror that there were spots of blood on one of the floorboards. She wasn't positive, but she thought it was approximately where she'd been on the floor when she and Draco had sex. She looked up sharply. Draco was also looking at the floor and appeared to have just noticed it too. He paled noticeably, and his expression grew black as he looked up at Moody, who was still silently studying the floor.

Hermione felt ready to die from the embarrassment, while Draco appeared to be on the verge of exploding with rage by the time Moody looked up from the floor and stared at Draco.

The air was tense. Deadly. Like a forest going abruptly silent. Defined by what was absent. The air between Draco and Moody was deathly cold. Hermione's heart was pounding as she stood between them. Neither had their wands drawn, but Hermione felt as though an unexpected sound might cause them to whip them out and Avada each other.

"You'll make a Vow?" Moody asked after several moments of silence.

“Isn’t that why you’re here?” Draco said, sneering.

Moody gave a sharp nod and then, with deliberate slowness, drew his wand. Draco’s expression tensed further, but he didn’t so much as twitch.

“Take each other’s right hands,” Moody instructed in a gravelly voice.

Hermione lifted hers, and Draco reached out and took it. His eyes shone silver as his fingers wrapped around hers.

“Kneel,” Moody said after a moment.

Hermione dropped to her knees, and Draco did the same across from her. Moody lowered his wand and rested the tip against their conjoined hands.

Hermione stared at Draco and her hand shook in his. “Will you, Draco Malfoy, aid the Order of the Phoenix in defeating Lord Voldemort to the best of your ability?”

His eyes met hers. “I will.”

At his words a thin tongue of red flame issued from Moody’s wand and wound its way around their hands. It was hot enough to burn, but neither of them flinched. “And after his defeat, will you promise never to claim his power or become a Dark Lord?”

Draco didn’t hesitate. “I will.”

A second flame twisted itself around their hands.

Hermione gripped his hand for a moment longer and then let go. The strands of flame tightened around their hands for a moment and then sank into their skin. As Hermione drew her hand away, it almost felt as though there were threads joining them that snapped as their hands parted.

There was a pause, and Draco stood and stared at Moody again.

“You can go, Granger. I believe Moody and I have things to discuss,” Draco said without looking at her.

Hermione hesitated.

“Go, Granger,” Moody said. “You can return to the safe house.”

Hermione turned reluctantly and left. Draco didn’t look at her as she pulled the door shut. He was glaring at Moody.

Moody returned to Grimmauld Place an hour later. Hermione was waiting on the stairs. She didn’t expect him to tell her what he and Draco had discussed in her absence, but she hoped he’d at least give her some indication.

He stared at her for a moment after closing the door. “Good work, Granger.” Then he walked further into the house without another word.

*Flashback 25*

**February 2003**

Grimmauld Place was quiet and sombre.

One of the major safe houses had been compromised. It had housed several significant figures in the Resistance, members of DA and the Order. They still weren't sure what happened. A patronus from Alicia Spinnet had burst into Grimmauld Place in the middle of the night. By the time the Order could mobilise a response, whatever had happened had mostly ended.

It hadn't even been a Death Eater attack. Hags mostly and werewolves. The house had been overrun with them. According to Ginny, it had been quite literally crawling with hags, more than a hundred. Many of the survivors brought back to the hospital were missing too many internal organs to be healed.

Alicia Spinnet, Dedalus Diggle, Septima Vector, and about thirty other people had died.

It abruptly shattered the high spirits that had been buoying the Resistance. In the process of trying to recover the survivors, Kingsley and several other members of the Order and Resistance used Dark Magic in order to force their way into the house.

It had resulted in an explosive argument between Harry and Kingsley afterward. The whole house was on edge.

The next week, when Hermione returned to the shack alone, she walked in uncertain of what would happen next. The room was empty. She stood waiting nervously.

Draco apparated in a minute later.

They stood staring at each other for several minutes. He ran his eyes over her, cataloguing her appearance in a way that was habitual at that point.

She didn't know what to say. She didn't know what was going to happen.

"I brought practice knives today," Draco said as though the past two weeks hadn't happened.

"Oh."

He pulled them out of his robes. One of the knives was small, the same size as the set he'd given her for Christmas. The second was larger.

He pressed the blade into his hand demonstratively. "They have wards on the tip and blade; they can't break the skin. Although they can bruise." He tossed the smaller knife to her.

"Knives are growing increasingly common in the field. Hags regularly carry them. Death Eaters are beginning to pick up on the trend. They're decent backup if you lose your wand."

Hermione examined the knife, running her finger along the edge that appeared razor sharp but felt more like the handle of a piece of cutlery.

“It’s difficult to win in a knife fight. Even if you survive it.” “I am aware,” Hermione said stiffly. She’d treated knife injuries with increasing regularity during the last year. As far as non-Magical injuries went, knives were the worst. Mangled internal organs, severe blood loss, punctured lungs, hemorrhage. Like severe slicing hexes, but always more ragged and difficult to close.

“I imagine you are.” He had not met her eyes. Not once. Since the moment he made the Vow, his eyes had dropped away from hers. “We’ll start with deflecting attacks. Then I show you how to attack with yours. Use non-lethal hexes to try to stop me. Your goal is to drop me before I make contact, or to deflect it if I get within range.”

He walked toward her. “In order to avoid a knife attack, you should use your opponent’s weight and momentum against them. If they’re lunging, dodge and try to disarm them.”

He demonstrated several techniques in slow motion; showing Hermione how to grab his wrist, guide it safely past her body, and then try to twist the knife free.

“Where did you learn all this?” she asked after he demonstrated a tenth method of disarming someone which involved breaking their arm.

His hands froze. “Bellatrix. I trained under her for over four years. She had a fondness for knives.”

“Did she know about your mother?”

He stepped away from her and his expression was tense. “She did. She was alway loyal to the Dark Lord, but she cared for her sister enough to want to see me succeed, rather than fail as was expected.”

“D-did your father know?” She couldn’t stop herself from asking the question.

Draco swallowed. “No.” He looked away. “My father—he—he was very protective of my mother. If he’d known—”

Draco was silent for a moment. “Occlumency isn’t a talent he has. Not to the level he would have needed it. He would have been vengeful, and it would have damned us all.”

The muscle in his jaw rippled. “My mother insisted we hide her condition from him. There was a potion prescribed by a Danish mind healer; it masked most of her symptoms. Prevented her from panicking when she was required to make appearances. She took it when my father visited. The Dark Lord had mostly kept my father in France and Belgium following his release. He assumed she was cold and distant because she blamed him for my taking the mark.”

“After Lestrange Manor?”

“Well, I suppose I could have just told him then.” The corner of his mouth twisted. “But I thought I could do more to avenge her if I had more time. I didn’t realise how he’d take the news.” He gave a bitter smile as he stared down at his hands. “I’m sure the Order wishes I had.”

Hermione blinked as she tried to imagine what state the Order might be in with Arthur and Molly and George still fighting; but with no Draco, no rescues, no intelligence on which battles they could

win, no warnings before they were hit. She twisted the knife in her hands.

“The Weasleys are my family, but we probably would have lost by now—you weren’t crucial in the army then. Your death and your father’s wouldn’t have been enough to affect the outcome of the war. They’d probably all be dead.”

He snorted faintly and continued to avoid her eyes.

“Draco...” she said tentatively, starting to reach toward him. He jerked sharply away from her.

“We should continue with training,” he said in a cold voice. “Given that you’ve now seen first hand the devastation caused by hags.”

Hermione swallowed. “We still don’t know how they got in. We don’t have any idea. Do you know anything about it?”

“Hags aren’t in my jurisdiction. I didn't hear until afterward, or I would have tried to give some warning.” He hesitated. “It’s possible someone in Sussex is working to find a way around the Fidelius Charm using Dark Creature Magic. If they suspected a safe house location, it may have been an unfortunately successful experiment. There are hundreds programs in Sussex; the branches don’t collaborate often. I don’t have contacts in all of them. You should re-ward your safe houses and move any that you can.”

“We are.”

“Good,” he said as he flipped the knife in his hand. “Let’s continue with training.”

He made her practice the forms and techniques again and again.

“Alright, let’s see how you manage with a real attack,” he said after an hour of slow practice. He stepped away from her.

He spun the knife in his right hand the same way he spun his wand as he crossed the room and got into position. His expression was cold and intent as he stared toward her.

Then, without warning, he lunged. Hermione dodged away and shot mild hexes as she evaded his initial attack. He was quick and relentless. He spun around her and brought the knife up to her throat before she could register that she needed to stop hexing him and try to deflect.

They both froze. Their eyes met for a moment, and it was like time stopped. His face was only inches away from hers, and Hermione forgot to breathe.

His expression grew hard, and he stepped abruptly away from her.

“Again. Timing is everything. You’re still too reluctant to move.” His tone was almost vicious. He stalked across the room and attacked her once more.

After an hour, he stopped.

“Alright. That’s enough for today,” he said, walking away from her. He reached into his robes and pulled out a scroll.

Hermione bit her lip, went over to her satchel and withdrew an envelope. She gripped it nervously in her hands as she turned to face him.

“Moody said to give you this,” she said, glancing down at the floor. It appeared to have been carefully scrubbed. She looked up in time to see his expression flicker.

“Of course, my orders for the week.” His mouth twisted briefly as he jerked it from her fingers.

She accepted the scroll in his hand and then stood hesitating. “Draco…”

“Run along home now, Granger. I have work to do.” His tone was cold. He turned away from her and ripped open the envelope.

Hermione stood for another minute, studying his back. He didn’t look back at her. He disappeared without a sound.

The next week, he still wouldn’t meet her eyes. He barely spoke to her. He’d train her for exactly two hours a week, hand over his intelligence reports, take his orders from Moody, and leave.

But he was alive; she got to see him and know he was still alive.

However, being alive did not appear to be something he cared about. He just looked tired. The rage around him felt smothered. He appeared to be existing out of sheer obligation.

After three weeks, she caught him by the wrist as he was accepting the envelope in her hand. “Draco, please—look at me,” she said, her voice pleading.

He jerked his hand away and looked up at her. His face and eyes were cold. “Is all this not enough for you, Granger? Is there something else you want?” “No. I just—I’m sorry.”

He sneered. “Perhaps someday when I have time I can make a list for you of all the things that apologies don’t fix.”

Hermione’s hand dropped. “Draco, I—“

He was gone.

She returned to Grimmauld Place. Her chest felt hollow.

Everything felt void.

She wanted to get rid of her books, her journals, everything related to Draco. It felt vindictive and cruel to have a notebook with neat bullet points:

~ Sensitive hands - cruciatus treatment useful context for physical contact

~ Shoulders and neck

~ Scars - very responsive

~ Lower jaw near ears

~ Cheekbones

As well as notes for herself:

~ Definite interest in hair

~ Loosen braids after foraging, pull a few curls free ~ Wrists easy contact - find context for pulling

up sleeves

~ Likes neck/throat. Possessive trait?

~ Wear collared shirts partly unbuttoned or v-necks. Borrow Ginny's blue boatneck shirt.

All the psychology books. The books on emotional trauma. On attachment disorders. On body language and involuntary physical cues. She wanted to burn it all.

She went up to her shared room with Ginny. Harry was currently on a mission in Scotland. The Order was trying to find a way to break into Hogwarts. It was the only place they were almost certain there was a horcrux to be found, but the castle was impenetrable. The Death Eaters were thorough when the prison was set up.

Hogsmeade had been nearly razed in the early years of the war. There was no Shrieking Shack tunnel or tunnel via the hump on Gunhilda de Gorsemoor. The Order kept trying to find a way past the wards without success. It was Harry's third mission there. Harry, Ron, Terry Boot, and Zacharias Smith had been sent. Harry hadn't spoken to Hermione since Christmas.

She cast the unlocking charms on her bedroom door and pushed it open. As she walked in, she heard a quick gasp.

Ginny was huddled next to her bed quietly sobbing. She turned sharply when Hermione entered the room. Ginny's expression as she turned and caught sight of Hermione was anguished; her chest was stuttering sharply as she gasped rapidly through her open mouth. Even her red hair was wet with tears. "Ginny," Hermione said. "Ginny, what's wrong? What happened?" "I don't know—," Ginny forced the words out and then started crying harder. Hermione knelt down next to her friend and hugged her. "Oh god, Hermione—," Ginny gasped. "I don't know how—" Ginny broke off as she struggled to breathe. Choked hiccoughing sounds emerged from deep in her throat as she fought against her spasming lungs. "It's alright. Breathe. You need to breathe. Tell me what's wrong and I'll help you," Hermione promised as she ran her hands up and down Ginny's shoulders. "Just breathe. In to a count of four. Hold it. Then out through your nose for a count of six. We'll build up to that. I'll breathe with you. Alright? Come on, breathe with me. I've got you." Ginny just cried harder. "It's alright," Hermione kept saying as she started taking deep demonstrative breaths for Ginny to follow. She held Ginny tightly in her arms so that she'd feel Hermione's chest expanding and contracting slowly as a subconscious cue. Ginny kept crying for several more minutes before her sobs slowed and her breathing slowly began mirroring Hermione's. "Do you want to tell me what's wrong, or would you rather I go get someone else?" Hermione asked when she was sure Ginny was not going to keep hyperventilating. "No—you can't—," Ginny gripped Hermione's shirt roughly to stop her. "Oh god! I don't—" Ginny started sobbing into Hermione's shoulder again. "I didn't mean to—," Ginny sobbed, "I didn't mean to. I don't know what to do."

"Ginny, what's wrong?" Hermione was growing cold with dread. What had possibly happened to make Ginny cry so much? Ginny was silent for several seconds. Then she drew a deep breath and held it for a moment. "I'm pregnant."

Ginny burst into tears again.

Hermione jerked back and stared at Ginny in horror. She felt as though she'd been violently punched in the chest. "How? D-did the contraceptive potion not work?" Hermione felt on the verge

of a panic attack of her own. Oh god.

If the contraceptive potion had failed—

If Hermione were pregnant—she'd have to abort it. She couldn't be pregnant during a war. It was not worth the risk. Pregnancy would cause her magic to destabilise. She regularly used certain spells countering curses that were in the darker shades of grey. It was cumulative, and the exposure could result in foetal abnormalities. It might have already—if she were pregnant. Now that Padma had mostly replaced her, developing counter-curses was one of the most vital things that Hermione did in the hospital wing.

If Draco found out that she'd seduced him when she was fertile, he'd probably think she did it on purpose. He'd—he'd—

He'd hate her forever.

Even more than he already did.

The tips of Hermione's fingers were beginning to tingle as though there were needles pricking them.

Ginny's expression furrowed. She stared at Hermione's frozen expression as she smeared her tears away with the back of her hands. "No. I didn't—I was only taking it when Harry was here. Because of the taste, you know. But last month when I was in Ireland and he and Ron showed up at the safe house, I didn't have the potion with me. I thought, it was just once, the charm should be enough."

Ginny sniffled and buried her face in her hands.

Hermione nearly collapsed with relief. There wasn't anything wrong with her contraceptive potions.

Hermione shoved the line of thought away and slammed her occlumency walls in place, forcing herself to focus on Ginny. She hugged Ginny reassuringly and pressed a kiss in her hair.

"It's alright. It will only take me a few days to get the ingredients to make an abortifacient."

"I can't," Ginny choked out the words and started crying again. Hermione's hands on Ginny's shoulders tightened as she stared at her. She drew a quick breath. "You want to keep it."

Ginny nodded, sniffling. "I have to. Harry—all he talks about is having a family. How after the war we're going to have children. Boys named James, Sirius, or Colin, or girls named Lily and Luna. That's—that's—everything he dreams of. If I got an abortion—it would break his heart. He'd say it was fine, but he'd be devastated. To him it would mean I didn't think he could win. And I can't keep something like that a secret my whole life. Knowing he'd be broken-hearted if he knew and just pretending."

Hermione gave a slow nod and looked away. "Alright." She swallowed. "You can probably stay here until Harry gets back from his current mission. And then we can move you to one of the hospice safe houses. You'll want to be with your mum, won't you?"

Ginny shook her head sharply, smearing the tears off her face. "No. I need to hide it. No one can know. Not Mum, not Harry, not anyone."

Hermione stared at Ginny bewildered. Ginny looked down and her chest shuddered. "Harry—Harry isn't doing very well right now. Everyone has been getting so excited that we're nearing the end,

that we're at the final haul. And he's happy—he thinks it could be real but—it's also breaking him. It's all resting on him but—he doesn't know how to win. How it's supposed to work. He's afraid if anyone realises it, that the whole Resistance could collapse. He's started having nightmares again. Even with me. I don't think he even knows how to function without Ron. We're all that's holding him up. If he finds out I'm pregnant—I'm afraid the stress will end up breaking him completely. It's not like he needs more motivation to want all this done. Thinking that he has a child depending on him—it would probably make everything worse."

Hermione swallowed hard, trying to weigh whether there would be any value in trying to dissuade Ginny. She studied Ginny's face. The stubborn set line of her mouth and jaw and the determined fire in her eyes.

Hermione let out a low, tired sigh. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know. Maybe I could pretend to get sick with something and hide at one of the hospice houses."

Hermione raised her eyebrows doubtfully, but after a moment she tilted her head thoughtfully to the side. "I think I could pull that off. But—Ginny, you're going to have to be isolated. It could be months. What if you have the baby and the war is still going? Are you going to hide it from Harry then too?"

Ginny shook her head. "No. If the war goes that long, I'll come clean. But if I'm pregnant, Harry will just worry. Being pregnant isn't the same as having an actual baby. If you made me seem sick with something contagious but curable, he'll be upset but he'll be fine. He trusts you. If you tell him it'll take a few months to heal but I'll be alright, he'll believe you. He knows you don't lie to him, even when he wants you to." Hermione's eyes dropped, and she twisted the hem of her shirt in her fingers. Ginny grabbed her hand.

"You'll help, Hermione. You'll help me protect Harry, won't you?"

Hermione nodded slowly. Her whole body felt leaden. "I'll help you. I'm going to need a few days to figure out how to do this."

"Thanks, Hermione." Ginny grew tearful again. "God, I was so careful. I never meant for this to happen."

Hermione hugged her stiffly and let Ginny cry into her shoulder for several more minutes. She rubbed absent-minded circles on Ginny's back while she made a mental checklist. "We'll figure something out. I know you weren't trying to get pregnant."

Ginny nodded against Hermione's neck. "Thanks. I mean it, Hermione. You're only person I can trust with this." She sat back and rubbed her face. "God, these hormones and everything smells. I don't even know when I cried this much. I think I'm going to have to just hide in here. I passed the kitchen earlier and nearly threw up in the hallway."

Hermione nodded as she mentally catalogued long term illnesses. "That's fine. I need to research." She stood up. "Just stay here. Let me know if you need anything." Hermione walked out of the room and down the hallway to the bathroom. She closed the door carefully behind herself and, looking down at her stomach, cast a pregnancy detection charm. Her hands were shaking faintly.

Negative.

She closed her eyes and collapsed against the door in relief.

She stayed there for another minute until her hands stopped shaking, then she hurried out of the bathroom to the library.

Hermione spent nearly two days straight brewing experimental potions and practicing glamour charms and trying to make sure that every detail was perfect. She gathered up a bagful of potions and went into the bathroom. She downed a small vial and watched the potion take affect.

It took a few minutes. Then a sensation similar to a mild form of polyjuice tingled across her skin and she watched herself transform. Her skin broke out in tight clusters of painful-looking purple pustules across her entire body. She grimaced and inspected herself from all angles. It was a horribly convincing transformation. She pressed and prodded at several of the pustules and felt nothing. The suspended glamour was painless.

She swallowed the antidote and felt her skin tingle again as she watched her skin clear.

She gathered up her potions and went to her room. Ginny was sitting in her bed, flipping through a magazine. Hermione sat down, and Ginny looked up, her eyes wide and curious.

Hermione fidgeted with the bag in her hands. “I’ve developed a potion that mimics the external symptoms of spattergroit disease.”

Ginny’s face screwed up. “Really? Does it have to be that?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “It’s the best option I can come up with that meets all your requirements. It’s contagious; it's known to take up to a year to recover from, so you can stay hidden as long as necessary. It looks convincing; if you don’t look horribly sick, people might be skeptical. Especially since your brothers are the ones who invented skiving snackboxes. No one is going to think you’re faking this. And possibly most importantly, it’s non-lethal. Harry isn’t going to have to worry that you may die from it. Since it’s not a full physical transformation—just an external glamour—I was able to suspend the potion in dragon blood, which means each dose will last for weeks. You won’t have to constantly redose to maintain it.”

Ginny nodded.

Hermione fidgeted with the string on the bag. “Spattergroit is highly contagious. If someone in the Resistance contracted it, they would be immediately placed in quarantine to prevent risking the entire Resistance. Even though it’s non-lethal. I’m—I’m going to have to inform Kingsley of the real situation in order to quarantine you.”

Ginny immediately opened her mouth to object, but Hermione held up her hand to silence her.

“If I don’t tell him, he won’t approve having me as your caretaker. I promise, if I explain it, he won’t feel obliged to tell Harry. But he needs to know in order to maintain the lie. And— that way if anyone in your family or Harry try to demand to see you—he has more veto power than I do. Moody will back him too. We need Kingsley.”

Ginny gave a reluctant nod.

Hermione pulled out a book with a marked chapter which she held out to Ginny. “Early symptoms of Spattergroit are itching and a sore throat. Anyone you interact with is going to get quarantined for a few days. So avoid Poppy and Padma,” Hermione’s mouth twitched faintly, “if you have anyone you think needs a few days off, they’re the ones you should go see.”

The corner of Ginny’s mouth lifted slightly. Her eyes grew misty.

Hermione stood up. “I need to go talk to Kingsley. I’m going to dose you before you go to bed. So you’ll ‘wake’ up with it.”

Ginny’s ‘disease’ threw Grimmauld into chaos. Hermione and Ginny’s room was placed under a mountain of quarantine and containment wards. Only Hermione could enter the room without setting off a house-full of screaming alarms. Kingsley and Hermione coordinated details as much as possible. Once the diagnosis was given, Hermione and a handful of other occupants in Grimmauld Place were also placed under a precautionary three-day quarantine in another room.

Padma was sent foraging and took Parvati with her. The girls fell into a harpy trap. They fought their way out, but Parvati ended up with lacerations down her back, and Padma’s right foot was almost entirely chewed off. Hermione consulted with Poppy through the quarantine wards, but there was nothing that could be done to restore Padma’s foot.

Once everyone under temporary quarantine had been cleared, Kingsley placed Hermione in charge of monitoring Ginny’s condition. She would visit Ginny every four days. The rest of the time, Ginny would have to be kept in isolation. No one would enter her room. Dobby was made responsible for caring for Ginny day to day and getting meals to her.

When Molly Weasley recovered from her indignation at Kingsley for not being permitted to see her daughter, she was effusive in her appreciation to Hermione for how meticulously Hermione had mapped out Ginny’s care.

Researching midwifery on the sly was folded into the the endless list of things Hermione secretly did when she wasn’t in the hospital ward covering for Padma.

The Resistance was too busy for word of Ginny’s sickness to cause ripples for long. Once the initial panic that the disease might spread had abated, things slipped back into a tenuous sense of normalcy. Hermione only had to dread Ron and Harry’s reactions when they returned from Scotland.

Her whole life felt tense without any sense of relief. She felt worn through; stretched out until she was nearly transparent.

She worried every day about Draco, but seeing him was just a different kind of agony. He was gaunt and on edge. He’d barely look at her; he’d barely speak to her. He trained her. He turned over his information. He accepted his orders from Moody. He left.

When she tried to speak to him, he just grew colder.

After several more weeks, he paused and looked her over again rather than just leaving. “Tell Moody to feed you. You look like a corpse.”

He vanished before Hermione could say anything.

When she returned to Grimmauld Place, Angelina looked up from a match of Wizard's Chess with Katie, her expression sober. "Harry, Ron, and Terry are back. The Order is debriefing now. No one has told them about Ginny yet."

Hermione nodded and went to the dining room.

"The castle has so many wards it's hard to even find," Harry was saying in a low reluctant voice when Hermione opened the door. He was slumped low in his chair. His eyes had such dark shadows under them that they looked bruised. "We went through the ruins of Hogsmeade trying to find any of the old tunnels. We tried digging out the Honeydukes tunnel, but it's collapsed. So we had the idea of trying to approach through the Black Lake. But when we went in, inferi started coming up and—that's—that's when Zacharias…"

"It wasn't Harry's fault. The lake was my idea," Ron broke in as soon as Harry's voice trailed away. "When he tried to go in after Zacharias, I stopped him."

Ron had a faintly dazed expression, as though he were in shock. Harry refused to look over at Ron.

"That was the right decision, Ron. Inferi in water are nearly impossible to fight since they can't be set on fire," Remus said, resting a hand on Ron's shoulder.

"That's not enough of a reason to let Zacharias drown," Harry said in a bitter voice, his expression twisted with frustration. He was holding a battered quill and steadily ripping the barbs off each side as he twisted it around and around in his fingers. "There was something we could have done if Ron hadn't wasted time restraining me and left Terry to go in alone."

"Keeping you alive is Ron's job, Harry," Kingsley said. "Those are his orders; if you're belligerent about it, I'll reassign him and take over your protection personally. Do you object to your partner, Harry?"

Harry glared at Kingsley, crushing the quill in his hand. "No."

"Good. Anything else to report?"

Harry was silent.

"We pulled out after we lost Zacharias," Ron said in a dull tone, his whole body seemed limp. "Most of the mission was spent surveying and then tunneling."

Kingsley gave a slow nod. "Getting into Hogwarts is vital to bringing this war to an end. You'll have a few days to recover, and then we'll send in a larger team."

"I'd like to volunteer for the next mission," Remus said, leaning forward. "It's clear of the next full moon. I'm familiar with the Forbidden Forest; I have a few ideas that may be worth exploring."

"Me too," Tonks nodded.

"Alright. Harry, Ron, Remus, and Tonks from the Order. Moody and I will look over the rosters and choose two more teams." Harry nodded and looked distractedly toward the door. "Alright. Anything else?"

"Yes…," Kingsley said slowly.

Hermione cringed inwardly. Harry looked sharply over at Kingsley. “What is it?”

“While you were gone, Ginny Weasley contracted Spattergroit disease—“ “Is she alright? I need to see her,” Harry jumped to his feet, his eyes wide and panicked.

“She’s been placed in quarantine,” Kingsley said before Harry could bolt to the hospital ward. “Spattergroit is non-lethal but highly contagious; an outbreak could have a devastating effect on the Order. She is not permitted any visitors until she recovers.”

Harry swallowed and gripped the back of his chair. “Fine. How long does it take? A couple weeks?”

The room turned to look at Hermione by the door. Harry’s expression grew guarded as he met her eyes.

“Spattergroit can be a long-term illness. It normally takes months but it can even last up to a year before the contagious elements finally fade. It’s impossible to say how long she’ll be in the quarantine,” Hermione said quietly.

“Months? A year?” Harry looked ready to fall over backwards. “You—you can’t isolate her for that long. That’s torture. There must be a way for me to visit her. Some kind of potions. Or spells.”

“Granger, as our most qualified medical professional, is the only one cleared to visit her in order to monitor her condition. Dobby delivers her meals, since House-elves are immune to disease and not known to carry it. You can send letters and messages with them. They are the only ones permitted in the room. If you make any attempts to come in contact with Ginny, you will potentially endanger the entire war effort. Harry, I will only say this once. If you try to violate the quarantine, she’ll be moved to an undisclosed location until she recovers. If you have questions, take them to Granger. Meeting dismissed.”

Everyone else filed out. After a few minutes, Hermione stood alone with Harry.

“She’ll—she’ll be okay, won’t she?” Harry said once the room was empty. “Is she in pain?”

“In time she’ll be fine,” Hermione said, fidgeting her hands nervously behind her back. “She’s not in any pain. She’s taking restorative potions and she spends a lot of time sleeping. Spattergroit recovery is very reliant on good health, I’m doing everything possible to make sure she is comfortable and happy.”

“Okay.” Harry nodded repeatedly. “That—that’s good. Do you know how she got it?”

Hermione shook her head. “It’s fungal. No one else has caught it. It may just have been bad luck.”

Harry nodded and stepped closer, his expression grew earnest. “Can I see her? Just once? Just for a minute. I just want to make sure she knows I love her.”

The corner of Hermione’s mouth twitched as she shook her head. “I’m sorry, Harry, she’s in quarantine. There’s no "just for a minute." No one can go in.”

Harry’s eyes got bigger. “I’ll be careful. Anything I need to do, I’ll follow all your instructions. Just once.” His voice was both pleading and conspiratorial. She knew that voice so well.

Hermione smiled at him sadly as she curled her hands into tight fists behind her back. “I’m sorry, Harry. I can’t break the rules. Not even for you.”

*Flashback 26*

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains an episode of self-harm.

**March 2003**

Ginny's pregnancy went as smoothly as could have been hoped. She was physically drained from the toll it took on her Magic, but aside from sleeping most of the day and refusing most of the food Hermione had sent, her pregnancy symptoms were relatively minor. After hearing about Narcissa Malfoy's near death during pregnancy, Hermione was paranoid about what kind of toll magical pregnancy could take. But Ginny seemed to handle pregnancy easily.

"It's a Prewett thing; easily pregnant, easy pregnancies," Ginny said with a shrug when Hermione asked.

"That's lucky, I'd hate to be leaving you alone like this if you were as sick as the books say witches can get from pregnancy," Hermione said, studying the bright yellow orb fluttering over Ginny's stomach. "The baby has a good magical signature; it seems healthy. But I'm not very practiced with any of these spells."

Hermione flipped to a different page in the *Guide to Effective Care in Magical Pregnancy and Childbirth* and practiced a charm to check for placenta previa.

"Have you heard anything from Harry and Ron?" Ginny asked after a few minutes of Hermione manipulating diagnostic charms.

Hermione nodded and cancelled all the diagnostics hanging around Ginny. "They're back at Hogwarts again. They haven't sent any messages."

"Harry sends his stag at night. I think he must do it when he's on lookout duty. It came into my room last night," Ginny pressed her lips together and looked on the verge of tears.

Hermione squeezed her hand.

"I feel so bad I'm lying to him," Ginny said, tugging at the tips of her hair. "And that I'm making you lie too. I'm sorry. I should have been more careful."

"It's alright. You don't need to worry about me." Hermione gave a weary shrug as she shrank the book and slipped it into a bag. Ginny leaned forward and grabbed Hermione's left wrist. "Well, I don't have very much to do in here. And I think you need someone to worry about you. You're so thin." Ginny ran her thumb over Hermione's ulna as though to illustrate how the bones jutted out. Hermione jerked her wrist free and pulled her sleeves down. "You don't look like you sleep at all. You look like you're made of paper. Don't you have anyone?"

Hermione looked away. "Well, George has offered," she said with a wry smile. "But I don't think he

really meant it."

Ginny poked her. "Be serious. You can't survive this war alone. No one can carry it. We survive together." Ginny looked Hermione over carefully. "I mean, maybe you were alright before. But—you—you don't look like you're coping anymore. Ever since Christmas, I don't think I've seen you sleep. Don't you have anyone at all?"

Hermione scrunched her nose distastefully. "I think I've already mentioned that cathartic shagging is not my thing." She scoffed as she shook her head. "Adding a fuck-buddy is hardly going to improve my coping skills."

Ginny rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I'm not saying get a fuck-buddy. You don't even have anyone to talk to or get a hug from after a bad day. Whenever anyone tries to reach out to you, you push them away, the way you did with Harry on Christmas. I don't understand why you don't let anyone share the load. I know that look in your eyes; it's the same one Harry gets when the war is crushing him. But Harry knows he has Ron no matter what, and me, and you, and the family, and DA, and Remus and Tonks, and the Order, and even his stupid Muggle fights when it gets too heavy. He's got all that to fall back on when he needs to put it down for a little while. You need to do that too."

Hermione stared down at her nails and fidgeted with the cuticles for a minute. "What load do I have that anyone would be willing to share with me?" Her voice was bitter.

She turned and looked out the window for a minute before looking back down at her hands. "It's worse, Ginny, to think someone is there for you to lean on and then find they aren't when you need them most. I can't—I can't take that risk. I wouldn't be able to handle it."

Ginny gave a frustrated huff and poked one of the glamoured pustules on her wrist. "Harry and Ron get angry at you because they care, though. You can't assume that people are going to let you down and just never give anyone a chance. What if they'd be there, and you never trusted them enough to find that out?"

Hermione twisted her wand in her hands. "What if they aren't? When I really need them to?"

There was a pause, and Ginny gave a sad sigh.

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment before reopening them. "This way has become habit for me, Ginny. I don't know how to do it differently."

"What about me?" Ginny said, with a small smile.

Hermione looked at her. "You?" "Why can't you talk to me? See? We've been friends for years; we've roomed together for nearly four years. But you never even considered that I'm someone for you to talk to. Even before I became an Order member, Harry and I were still able to talk about things. He could tell me enough. You can talk to me. You can trust me. I won't judge. I'm trusting you. I'm here for you. If you need someone, you can talk to me about anything."

Hermione stared at Ginny guiltily. "Ginny… I—it's not a matter of me not trusting you. I— just—I don't—"

Ginny's expression fell. "Never mind. I'm not trying to make you. I just wanted to you to know you have someone to talk to. If you ever wanted to. Even if I disagree with you, I'm not going to stop

being your friend."

"Thanks, Ginny," Hermione said, looking away. "I do appreciate it. If I could—I would talk if I could. But I don't even know where to start. And—" she glanced at her watch, "I need to go. Padma's shift is starting soon, and I'm still helping her manage it."

"Okay," Ginny sighed. "I'll let you go then. Is Padma alright?"

"As well as can be expected. She's still adapting to the prosthetic; it gets sore and she tires easily—the charm work is not as good as it could be. Flitwick and I are still tinkering with the balance."

Hermione gathered her books and potions up and shoved them all into a bag before she walked out of Ginny's room; making a show of removing all kinds of protective wards from her body and applying cleansing charms before heading to change her clothes.

On her way to the hospital ward, she stopped and leaned against the wall for a few minutes. She pressed her palms flat against the wallpaper to try to stop the trembling in her hands.

She hadn't been able to sleep for more than a hour or two at a time since Christmas. She took Dreamless Sleep potion once a week on Monday night, so her hands wouldn't shake during training with Draco.

Everyone else congregated in the sitting room at night when they couldn't sleep, but Hermione found herself unable to bear being there. She stalled the conversations; people tried to cheer her up and include her. She was too tired to pretend.

Most nights, when the house was quiet, she'd sit alone in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place, trying to find something to do to to fill all the cold empty hours until sunrise.

She pulled her hands away from the wall and went to take her shift.

Hermione was on the stairs with Padma, helping her practice ascending the stairs without a cane, when the door of Grimmauld Place burst open.

"No! Let go! Let go!" Harry was screaming and trying to tear himself out of Remus' arms as Remus dragged him through the door. "Fuck. LET GO OF ME!! We can't leave them!!"

Harry punched Remus in the face as he struggled to break loose. "Someone stun him!" Remus snapped as he slammed Harry to the floor and pinned him there in order to keep him from twisting free.

"God, no. Fuck. You left Ron! LET GO! YOU CAN'T MAKE ME LEAVE HIM!!!"

Hermione whipped her wand out and caught Harry in the side of the head with a stunner. Harry slumped down limp.

"Don't wake him unless he's restrained!" Remus snapped, turning and rushing out the door and apparating before anyone could ask questions.

Hermione left Padma on the stairs and hurried down to Harry's limp body. She cast a diagnostic, checking him over carefully. He was covered in dirt and had a concussion and several fractured ribs; several nails had been torn off, and he was carrying cursed injuries.

“Someone send a patronus to Kingsley and Moody,” Hermione said in a sharp voice as she countered the curses. She levitated Harry off the floor and took him up to the hospital. It didn’t take long to repair Harry’s injuries. Then she poured several strengtheners and restorative potions down his throat.

She hovered over him, wiping his face clean and watching the colour slowly come back to his features. She pushed his wiry hair back from his face and traced a fingertip along his scar.

“Oh Harry, Harry, Harry,” she murmured under her breath and pressed her forehead down against his. “Please, Remus, bring Ron back.”

She stayed beside Harry until Neville appeared, accompanied by Charlie who was carrying an unconscious Tonks. Padma came in behind them. Neville’s wand arm was broken in multiple horrifying angles.

“What happened?” Hermione asked as Padma levitated Tonks into a bed.

“Fuck if I know,” Neville said. He was so pale his skin was nearly translucent. Hermione cast a diagnostic; he’d been hit in the arm with the acid curse and he also showed signs of being crucio’d. “They must've expected we might eventually use the tunnels. We tripped an alarm or something. Suddenly there were more than a dozen Death Eaters in there. There were anti-apparition wards; we didn’t even think to check for them while digging. We held them back and Remus blew a hole in the roof of the tunnel and dragged Harry out first. We tried to follow. Ron got hit with something. Anthony and I were trying to get him but they got my wand arm with the acid curse. Anthony countered it, used a leviosa and threw me out of the tunnel. Idiot, let his guard down. I saw the killing curse hit him. I don’t know how Tonks got out. No one else—got out. When Remus got back, he just made us apparate.”

“So—is Ron alive?” Hermione’s voice shook as she removed the bones in his arm. Neville was so dazed he didn’t even react.

“I don’t know—“

“We sent word to Mum,” Charlie said in a wooden voice. “To find out what the clock says.” Ron’s hand on the Weasley family clock steadily read Mortal Peril.

Hermione went personally and stood staring at it beside Molly Weasley, who had taken up vigil there. Hermione felt half-afraid that if she turned away it might move abruptly to “Lost” beside Percy’s.

It took half an hour before she could force herself to tear her eyes away.

“Molly, there’s a meeting in an hour, about what to do. I—can stay with Arthur, if you want to go,” Hermione finally said, resting a hand lightly on Mrs Weasley’s shoulder.

Molly didn’t look away from the clock. She shook her head. “No. I have to stay here, dear. The boys will be there. I have to stay here.”

Hermione withdrew her hand. “I’ll make you some tea before I go.”

The meeting was seething.

“We’re not going to attempt any suicide missions to get into Hogwarts,” Kingsley said as soon as the debriefing was completed. He was utterly calm despite the tension vibrating through the air. “Getting into the school was already a top priority mission and it continues to be. Given our inability to even access the school, we cannot immediately plan a rescue to find a single prisoner inside the castle. Until we have better information, a rescue attempt is off the table.”

Charlie smacked the table angrily, and the meeting descended into shouting for several minutes.

“We can’t leave him there. He’s an Order member. They’re probably torturing him. What if Lucius Malfoy gets his hands on him?” Harry’s chest was heaving with panic and rage despite the Draught of Peace and sedatives Hermione had given him prior to approving his rennervation.

“There is nothing that can be done until we have better intelligence,” Kingsley said, unmoved. He was always exactingly calm during meetings. His eyes darted around the room for a moment before stopping on Harry. “While you recuperate, Moody is already heading a new mission at Hogwarts. We are fully aware of the urgency of the situation, Harry.”

“I don’t need to recuperate,” Harry snapped, his teeth bared. “I need you to help me get Ron back. There has to be something we can do. We have prisoners, we could do an exchange.”

Kingsley drew a long breath and shook his head. “If the Order attempted to open a negotiation channel, we could alert them to the value of their prisoner. You’re grieving; until you have a new partner assigned to you, you are restricted from further missions.”

Harry stood up and walked out of meeting without another word.

“Keep an eye on Harry,” Kingsley said. “Remus, Fred, Charlie, don’t let him out of your sight.” As the room cleared, Kingsley remained at the end of the table. Hermione stood up to leave.

“Granger, a word before you go,” Kingsley said.

She stopped and turned back. Kingsley cast a privacy charm around them. She curled her hands into fists behind her back.

“You need to speak with Malfoy. I want everything about Hogwarts, immediately.”

Hermione stared at Kingsley guardedly. “Now?”

“Soon as you can, wait there until you speak to him. Tell him it’s critical. Make clear this is a top priority for the Order.”

She nodded and started to turn before stopping. “Should I tell him why? That we're trying to get Ron back?”

Kingsley nodded slowly as he looked back at her. His expression was closed but his gaze as he studied her was meticulous. She often wondered what conclusions he was drawing.

“Yes. If he has a chance to get Ron back, that would be preferable to the losses we’ll suffer attacking Hogwarts. I doubt they’ll be foolish enough to kill him; Harry’s tendencies are too well known. Until we get Ron back, Harry’s useless. There are no solutions that won’t be a risk for the Order. Losing Ron could easily be a critical blow for us.”

Hermione’s mouth twitched at the unspoken implication. It was worth sacrificing Draco to recover

Ron. Of course. That was why she'd consented in the first place. She knew that calculus to be true. Because war was larger than anyone. But—but—

She swallowed. "Alright. I'll tell him," she said in a dead voice.

After a moment, she added "You realize Harry's going to try to stage a rescue on his own."

The corner of Kingsley's mouth twitched. "That's why I assigned Remus, Fred and Charlie. If I put myself on his detail, he'll try to go solo. He's less likely to leave them behind. I'm hopeful Remus can talk sense into him if he does anything stupid. Unless we put him in stasis somewhere the Weasleys can't access, I don't expect there's any way to stop him."

Hermione started to speak and then hesitated. Kingsley arched an eyebrow.

Her jaw tensed. "Ginny. Should we tell him about Ginny? It might ground him slightly."

She watched Kingsley calculate the question. She had realised a few years into the war that Kingsley Shacklebolt had been a Slytherin.

"Not yet. If we can't recover Ron within a week, we'll use it," Kingsley said finally. "I don't want any information getting to them. If we're lucky, they'll preoccupy themselves by trying to gather their own intelligence until Moody and I can find a solution." "Alright."

Hermione left the room and walked straight out of Grimmauld Place.

The room in the shack was cold. She wrapped her arms tightly around herself while she stood waiting for Draco to appear.

He came in less than five minutes.

He studied her face. "I assume this is about what happened at Hogsmeade."

Hermione gave a sharp nod. "They got Ron."

Draco's expression flickered. "It's Ron? I only heard it was a Weasley."

"It's Ron. We—we need him back. It's vital. We have to recover him."

Draco's expression grew cold. "Attacking Hogwarts would be suicide. The place is a fortress."

"We have to recover him," Hermione said without wavering. "It's not negotiable. I was told to tell you it's critical." Draco's eyes flashed faintly. "Ron is crucial within the Order. Kingsley wants everything you can provide about the Hogwarts prison."

He drew a short breath and jerked his head up. "Consider it done."

"Thank you," Hermione said, trying to catch his eyes for a moment. What if he died? What if this were the last time she ever saw him?

He didn't look at her. "I'll call you when I have something."

"Thank you, Draco."

He gave a hiss of irritation. His jaw clenched. "I'd prefer if you stopped calling me that."

Hermione felt her stomach drop. “Draco, when I kissed you—” His expression grew vicious. “Really, do we have time to discuss this right now?”

Hermione swallowed hard but couldn’t stop herself. “Is there a point when you will speak to me again? Are you ever going to even look at me?” Her voice was pleading.

Draco looked up sharply, and a cruel glint entered his eyes as they locked squarely on Hermione. It was like a punch in the gut to suddenly have his full attention levelled on her again.

“You want me to look at you, Granger?” Draco said, his tone was light—almost cajoling— but there was a freezing edge to it. He stalked forward and closed in on her. “Fine. I’m looking. It’s delightful, I must say, to see all the guilt in your eyes.”

He sneered down at her. “You know, I used to think the circumstances of my servitude to the Dark Lord were as cruel an enslavement as anyone could conceive. But I admit, it pales somewhat beside you.”

Hermione stared up at him and couldn’t breathe.

“I suppose no one realises how light one set of manacles is until they have two,” he said, studying her expression as his tone grew musing. “At least before I could console myself that it wasn’t my fault; that accepting everything was simply the best I could do to keep my mother safe. It’s different when I have no one to blame but myself.”

His hand came up and rested on her throat. “After all, I did choose you. You were so determined to do whatever it took, but you will always be a Gryffindor at heart. I envied the fact you still had that space to be naive; to credit me with goodness, and fail to realise that Moody and Shacklebolt had been setting me up from the beginning. When you begged for a chance to heal me, I gave in. When you touched me, I didn’t push you away. I thought, where’s the harm? It all ends soon enough. Life has been cold for such a long time.”

Hermione shook faintly.

He reached up and his fingertips ghosted across her cheek. Hermione closed her eyes and drew a sharp breath. He was so close she could smell the oakmoss and papyrus-sedge that clung to his skin.

“By the time I realised I’d miscalculated, you’d already forced your way in. You were so obvious, and it only made it worse. The fact you’d let me do anything to you if it meant saving the very friends that left you to be sold; that nothing I did would drive you off. At least when I sold myself and took the mark, my mother prostrated herself and begged to be the one to take it instead. I suppose, in some regards, I’m luckier than you.”

Hermione gave a low sob.

“Then, after you nearly died in Hampshire, I thought, at least I can keep her alive. She deserves to have someone who cares enough to try to keep her alive. I thought eventually you’d give up. But of course, you will do anything to save the people you feel responsible for. Of course you’d weaponise your own guilt in order to use mine.” He gave a low bitter laugh. “I’m sure there is something poetic in it all, but right now all I feel is a new set of manacles.”

His hand wavered for a moment before he withdrew it and stepped away from her.

“So forgive me if I dislike looking at you, I’m still adjusting to all the ways the new ones chafe.” He turned and apparated silently away.

Hermione sank to the floor and rested her head on her knees while she fought to breathe.

She returned quietly to Grimmauld Place and found her potion closet had been broken into. She checked the inventory and found several doses of polyjuice potion and two whole vials of veritaserum had been stolen. None of the concealed compartments had been touched.

Padma feigned ignorance when Hermione asked about it. “I was on another floor. By the time I got down the stairs, whoever did it was gone,” Padma said with a shrug.

“I can’t imagine what anyone needs with eighty doses of veritaserum,” Hermione said in a biting tone. “You’ll need to recalculate rationing until the next batch finishes next month. Perhaps next time you forget to activate the alarms when the wards are breached, ensure the thieves understand how veritaserum dosage works.”

Padma flushed and limped away.

Hermione set to replacing the wards on the closet and then went to check on the occupants in the hospital ward.

Having regular shifts in the hospital while Padma recovered was a relief. Something to do. Something to focus on. Something that was good; that didn’t add to the intricate web of deceit she spent most of her time being strangled by.

It was the only thing Hermione did that didn’t make her want to mutilate herself in penance afterward.

Not that it mattered whether she were penitent or not. Not that anyone cared.

When she sat alone in the kitchen at night she could whatever she wanted.

One line the first time. She’d watched the blood well up and slowly turn into a droplet that slid across her skin toward the table.

She’d flicked her wand and the blood vanished. Another flick and the cut was gone too.

The next night there had been more. The hours crawled past, night after cold night while she cut and cut. As many razor fine lacerations as she wanted. She could heal them all without so much as a scar.

She was good at it. Fixing external wounds. It was an exceptional talent of hers. It was something to do at night.

When she emerged from a visit with Ginny, she found Harry standing outside the door.

He looked feverish. His skin was pale, but his eyes were glittering brightly.

“Is she doing alright?” he asked before Hermione had shut the door behind herself.

“She’s doing fine. There isn’t any change yet,” Hermione said before Harry’s expression could become hopeful. She removed all the protective wards and cast cleansing charms on herself quickly.

He nodded rapidly. “Does she know about Ron yet?” “I told her. I told her I’d let her know as soon as we got him back.” She rested her hand on Harry’s arm. “We’re going to get him back, Harry.”

“I know. I know we will,” Harry said, then he glanced sharply around as though he suspected someone might be eavesdropping. “Can you—can you come with me?”

Hermione eyed him worriedly. “What is it, Harry?”

Harry shrugged with false carelessness. “I just need a healer, and you’re the best one.”

Hermione’s heart stalled. “What have you done, Harry? Have you—have you tortured someone?”

Harry’s head jerked up, and he stared at her, horrified. “What? No. Why would you think that?”

Hermione gave a faint gasp of relief and closed her eyes briefly. “Someone broke into my potion closet and stole almost our entire veritaserum supply for the month. I don’t know what other things you might be doing.”

Harry eyed her and shoved his hands into his pockets. “We just went and got a few snatchers. None of them know occlumency. Veritaserum works.”

“What do you need me for then?”

“I’ll tell you once we get there,” Harry caught her by the wrist and pulled his invisibility cloak over their heads. He led her out of Grimmauld Place and apparated.

They reappeared at an empty lot. Harry reached out and grabbed something invisible in midair. There was the screech of an old gate and Harry stepped forward, still holding Hermione by the wrist. As she followed him, a small cottage started appearing, surrounded by a large garden and a pond which she and Harry were standing beside.

“Where are we?” Hermione glanced around.

“It was the Tonks’ house,” Harry said. “Remus and Tonks re-warded it so Remus would have a safe place to transform.”

Hermione stared in disbelief. “Tonks comes back to the house her parents were murdered in?”

Harry looked up at the building and his eyes grew wistful. “It’s her childhood home. She got married in the living room. She says she had to come back. It’s all that’s left of her parents. If my parents’ house in Godric’s Hollow were still standing, I’d go back there too.”

He stood staring at the cottage for a minute before rousing himself. “Come on.”

Harry led the way along a winding gravel path up to the front door. The entry opened into the sitting room with a dining room beyond. Charlie, Fred, Remus and Tonks were all standing around a table. They looked up when Harry entered. Hermione followed him into the room. “I got a healer,” Harry announced as he walked in.

Everyone stared back in disbelief.

“Hermione?” Fred said in an incredulous tone. “I thought you were getting a field healer.”

“They don’t know enough,” Harry said flatly as he walked up to the table. Hermione hung back.

“It’s been three days; we don’t know what kind of injuries he might have. Hermione can heal anything.”

“And the last time she was on a mission was when?” Charlie said, arching an eyebrow as he stared at her.

Harry looked over to Hermione.

“Three and a half years,” Hermione said, avoiding everyone’s eyes.

“We can’t take her,” Fred said, folding his arms. “The Order needs her. There’s no replacing her as a healer, and she has no experience in the field.” “What the Order needs is to stop losing people, or there won’t be anyone left for her to heal.” Harry said in a furious voice. “Padma. Padma’s good with healing, and she’s used to being on a battlefield.” Remus said, studying Harry rather than Hermione. Harry shook his head. “Padma’s only got one foot. She might be ready for missions with a prosthetic in a few months, but she isn’t now. Pomfrey is in her sixties and gets winded on the stairs. I need someone who can move fast. Hermione doesn’t need to be used to fighting. We can cover her.” Harry’s jaw jutted out obstinately. “What are you planning? The five of you can’t possibly think you can break into Hogwarts for a rescue,” Hermione said, clutching her wand.

“Ron’s not at Hogwarts,” Harry said matter-of-factly, tapping a scroll of parchment. “We went out and got some snatchers. The word is that they moved him closer to London for interrogation. There’s a smaller prison near Cambridge.”

“Near Cambridge?” Hermione echoed. There were no known prisons in Cambridge. Draco would have mentioned it. “And you got this from snatchers?”

“We get a lot of information from snatchers. Most of the prison blueprints we use for our rescues come from snatchers, you know,” Harry said with a nod, looking down at a rough outline of a building.

Hermione twitched and felt cold. Moody had attributed most of Draco’s intelligence on prison blueprints as being from snatchers. She stepped closer and stared at the blueprint for a minute before looking back up. “Harry—this could be a trap,” she said as gently as she could.

“Yeah. Any of our intelligence could be a trap. But it’s been pretty good until now. I’m not going to doubt it the time it could mean getting Ron back. We have to go today. Tomorrow is the full moon,” Harry said in a tight voice.

Hermione looked at Charlie, Fred, Remus, and Tonks.

“It’s as good as anything else we’ve gotten,” Remus said, giving her a small smile. “The Order needs Ron back. The Death Eaters will probably expect us to delay and then use a large force, if we get in and out before they expect us, there will be fewer casualties.”

Hermione stood, wavering. If she exposed Draco to everyone in the room, there was no guarantee it would even stop them. It could just shatter the Order.

“Will you come, Hermione, to help me get Ron back?” Harry turned from the table and was studying her seriously.

“Harry—,” she started in a pleading voice. “I don’t know what they might have done to him after so

many days," Harry interrupted her, his voice thick. There was a tremor underlying it. "He could be—really, really hurt. That's why I need you to come. You're the best. You're the best Healer. If he's too hurt, we might not be able to get him out without you. But I'm going to go—I have to go get him."

"*Until we get Ron back, Harry's useless. There are no solutions that won't be a risk for the Order. Losing Ron could easily be a critical blow for us."*

Hermione swallowed. "Of course. Of course I'll come."

Harry gave a relieved sigh and grinned at her. "Good. Come see the plan."

The plan wasn't the Order's best. Strategy had always been Ron's strength and everyone could feel his absence and the need for him as they looked down at the blueprint before them. Hermione's job was to stay down and let everyone else deal with any guards or fighting. She was supposed to heal Ron as rapidly as possible once they found him in case they had to fight their way out. If there was a firefight, she was to get Ron out. Once she had gotten him clear, everyone else would retreat. Hermione stared down at the blueprint. It was a trap. The layout was too obvious, too detailed for a snatcher to know. She gnawed her lip as she considered what to do. "Alright. Everyone get ready. We'll head out in fifteen minutes," Harry said.

Hermione fidgeted nervously. "I need to get my kit. You didn't give me a chance to bring my supplies." Harry turned to stare at her, his green eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to sneak back and contact Kingsley so he can stop us?"

The corner of Hermione's mouth twitched. "No. I won't."

"Promise?"

"I promise, I'll just get my kit from Grimmauld Place and leave. I won't tell anyone in the Order or the Resistance."

Harry gave a slow nod. "Alright. Go fast. If you aren't back in fifteen minutes we're going to leave without you."

Hermione rushed out of the cottage and apparated to the shack. She waited for a few minutes. She felt cold with terror.

Moody was in Scotland. Kingsley was out gathering reconnaissance reports. There was no one to contact quick enough. No one who could or would stop Harry.

If she sent a patronus, she had nothing to say but that Harry was walking into a trap somewhere near Cambridge. It wasn't enough information for Kingsley to act on in time.

If Draco knew something, if he could tell her something concrete, she might be able to use it to dissuade Harry.

She gnawed at her fingernails and twisted at the collar of her shirt.

Finally she swallowed hard. Draco wasn't coming. It had been nearly ten minutes.

She was out of time. She conjured a piece of paper and scribbled a note for him with the the relevant details. Location. Strategy. Her suspicions. So if he came, he'd at least know why she'd called him.

She used a sticking charm to place it in the center of the floor where it was impossible to miss and headed to Grimmauld Place.

She sprinted up the stairs to her closet and pulled out her healing kit. It was almost identical to the one she'd given Draco but with a few more specialized potions and bandages and splints. She shrank it down and stuffed it into her pocket and then pulled up a floorboard and snatched up her knives; strapping one onto her left arm under her shirt and then the other onto her calf under her trousers. She started to reach for her cloak but drew her hand back. Too obvious. It could raise questions.

She stood up and rushed back out the door.

Harry and everyone else was standing in front of the Tonks cottage when she appeared.

"Wotcher, Hermione, we thought you split," Tonks said. Hermione shook her head. "No. I just had to make sure I had everything. I don't usually heal outside of the hospital ward."

Tonks nodded. "Alright. Grab on. I'm apparating everyone since I did the scouting."

Hermione gripped Tonks' arm, and the group vanished with sharp squeezing sensation and reappeared in a forest. A large, derelict, stone house stood in a nearby clearing.

"There's an anti-apparition ward about halfway across the field. Once you've got Ron, Hermione, get him past the wards and take him back to the cottage. That way we can make sure he's not tagged or traced before we go to one of the safe houses," Harry said quietly.

"Alright," Hermione said, nodding as she stared at the building. Her heart was beating so hard it hurt. She fidgeted with her wand and felt through her shirt to reassure herself that her knife was still there.

Harry, Remus, Fred, and Charlie started constructing an intricate detection spell while Hermione and Tonks kept watch.

They cast the web of magic off their wands, and it slowly drifted out of the forest, barely visible unless it was being looked for. It floated across the field toward the house, shimmering slightly at different points to indicate the various wards. As it phased through the building there were small flashes of red light…

"Two at the door," Harry said.

"Four upstairs," Fred added.

"More than ten in the basement," Charlie said. "Bet that's where they've got Ron."

"We go fast," Harry said. His wand was clenched in his fist, and his eyes were glittering as he stared at the building. He was bouncing on the balls of his feet. "With the detection wards in there, we've got ten minutes tops before reinforcements show up. Hermione, all you do is get Ron out."

*Flashback 27*

**March 2003**

It's a trap. It's a trap. It's a trap.

It was the only thing Hermione could think as Harry vanished under his cloak of Invisibility to set out across the field toward the house.

They watched the door open, and there were quiet flashes of spellwork before Harry's head appeared, and he beckoned them forward.

They moved toward the house under heavy disillusionment.

Hermione watched the ripples of Fred and Charlie move soundlessly up the stairs while Harry signaled toward a door that led down to the basement.

She could feel Tonks behind her as they descended the narrow stairs and heard muffled spells and falling bodies as Harry and Remus reached the bottom. They had been in the house for less than a minute.

Hermione heard a door blast open.

"Clear," Harry's disembodied voice called softly.

They worked down the basement hallway, forcing the doors open. The quiet felt deadly… it was broken only by the faintest shuffling of feet. Her heart was beating in her ears, louder than the sound of Harry breaking into room after room.

They were halfway down the hallway when the door at the far end flew open. Dozens of spells shot out. Hermione dove to avoid a cruciatus streaking down the hallway. Several curses ricocheted off the walls; the air was filled with magic.

Everything was simultaneously slower and faster. Hermione focused on keeping her shield up and dodging as rapidly as possible. As she spun away from an acid curse that would have caught her in the face, the deadly green of a Killing curse raced toward her.

"*You need to have the instincts to just move."*

She threw herself to the ground, shot up to her feet on the other side of the hallway and proceeded to machine-gun stunners into the room down the hall.

Nothing lethal. If Ron was there, she might hit him.

Finally, the spells stopped. There was a pause. "He's in here!" Harry shouted.

Hermione moved forward quickly into the room, removing her disillusionment. Harry was breaking through chains that had Ron hanging from the ceiling of the room. There were eight unconscious

Death Eaters on the ground.

Ron had been beaten. His face so swollen it was almost unrecognizable. He was clearly shouting, but no sound emerged. His wrists had deep cuts in them where the shackles had sunk into his skin while he'd been hanging. Harry broke through the chains, and Hermione and Tonks caught Ron before he fell.

"*Finite Incantatum.*" Hermione waved her wand over Ron's face as she whipped out her healing kit.

"Harry, you fucking idiot!" Ron exploded as soon as he was un-silenced. "Get out of here! Why the fuck did you bring Hermione?"

Too easy. It's been too easy. The words repeated themselves in her mind as she started healing Ron. She worked as quickly as she could; not everything, just enough, just enough to get him out of the house and able to fight if necessary.

"Verify it's him," Remus said.

"It's him," Harry said.

"Verify it," Remus snapped.

"How did Quirrell get past Fluffy?"

"With a bloody harp." Ron tried to push Hermione away and stand. "We have to get out of here."

"Swallow this," Hermione forced a potion to counter his internal organ damage down his throat, followed by a restorative and then a strengthening potion.

"We need to go now," Ron said as Hermione smeared bruise paste down his face to reduce the swelling so he could see.

"Let me fix your wand hand," she said, pushing back the shackle still encircling his wrist in order to drip Essence of Dittany into the deep laceration that cut to the bone. She repaired the fractures as fast as she could.

As she was performing the spells, the ring on her hand suddenly burned red hot. She gave a choked gasp as she kept working. The sensation had barely faded before it burned again.

"That's enough," Ron ripped his hand away from Hermione with a wince. "We have to get out. Did you bring me a wand?"

Harry pulled one out, and Ron gripped it limply and made to stand. He got halfway up and then sank back to the ground. Hermione pulled his arm over her shoulder. "You're with me," she said. "My job is to get you out."

"You bloody idiot, why the hell did you let Harry talk you into this?" Ron sagged against her, and she helped him down the hall.

"You keep Harry alive," Hermione said quietly, "and you're my best friend. Of course I came."

She got him up the stairs as her ring burned again. And again. And again.

Fred and Charlie were at the top of the stairs, waiting for them.

“Nine minutes, we need to go.” Charlie’s voice was practically vibrating with tension.

Charlie, Harry, and Fred went out first, followed by Hermione and Ron, with Remus and Tonks covering the rear. Hermione’s eyes locked on the edge of the anti-apparition ward.

“The wards end in eighty feet, we just have to reach the centre of the field,” she told Ron. Her voice was shaking but she tried to sound assured

They were twenty feet away from the house when the air broke with cracking sounds. The field just outside the anti-apparition ward suddenly filled with Death Eaters.

Hermione froze. There were possibly a hundred Death Eaters, and they immediately advanced through the ward, blocking the escape, a wall of curses streaking ahead of them.

If she tried to turn and run with Ron, they’d be mowed down. The closest edge of the anti-apparition wards was through the Death Eaters.

The strengthening potion had kicked in for Ron, and he was no longer leaning heavily on Hermione. The spare wand they’d brought for him still drooped slightly in his hand. “Stay down, Hermione,” he said as he straightened and moved forward to his place beside Harry.

The Order had nothing left but excellent fighters. The speed and accuracy with which everyone fought was remarkable. Considering the steep odds, it was unbelievable that they didn’t all immediately die. The disparity in firepower was tremendous. Tonks and Fred were the only ones using truly dangerous spells as they fought. The ‘strategy’ for the escape rapidly dissolved. Ron was nowhere near Hermione.

The Death Eaters attacking didn’t seem particularly talented; there was a notable lack of finesse and coordination in their attack. However, the difference in numbers was staggering. There were more than ten Death Eaters to every one of them. Hermione steadied herself behind the shield she had cast. She cast a slicing hex at several throats. Tiny little cuts. Simple. Permanent.

Her aim had grown precise.

Three Death Eaters dropped, one after another. She tried a few more, but other Death Eaters had the sense to keep their shields up. She slipped low severing charms toward their feet. Quite a few of the Death Eaters’ shields weren’t comprehensive.

There were screams as more Death Eaters fell, their Achilles tendons cut through, dropping their wands as they went.

Hermione followed the severing charm with more lethal spells to ensure they all stayed down. Her shield charm was beginning to wear through from the number of spells that had struck it. She dove and spun rapidly to the side as she avoided a Killing Curse. She felt it burn through the air near her cheek as it nearly grazed her. She recast her shield as she fought to move toward the boundary of the anti-apparition wards.

She looked for Harry and Ron and the others, but the Death Eaters were so close. Everyone was spread out. Hermione turned sharply to avoid an unfamiliar curse. As she did, something struck her left wrist. The pain was searing.

She stumbled back, glancing down, and found she’d been hit where her shielded shirt had ridden up

on her wrist. Cruel, deep pustules were welling up along her arm. The acid curse. If they burst, they'd spit their acid and spread. It was so agonising that it was hard to rasp out the counter curse. She was forced to stop and dodge or drop to avoid new curses. On the third try, she managed to get the counter-curse to stick. The pustules subsided, but the pain was still indescribable.

She fell back, gasping raggedly, trying to find a more defensible spot.

It was so open. Nothing to hide behind but bodies.

She couldn't stop herself from calculating her injury, like a ticker running in the back of her mind. Non-lethal but severe. She'd scar, but she was not at risk of losing her hand. The spots where the acid had eaten away at the bones in her wrist would never recover until she removed and regrew them. She'd have to be careful not to fall on it; the bones were pocked with holes and highly fragile.

She cast a powerful confringo to force back the Death Eaters closing in on her. Where were the others?

Remus and Tonks were fighting back to back. Holding their own but nearly thirty feet away, pinned up against the wall of the house. Harry was closest to her, furiously battling dozens of Death Eaters. His glasses appeared broken, and it looked like a slicing hex had hit him on the forehead. There was blood streaming down half of his face. Fred, Charlie and Ron were fighting their way toward him. Hermione tore her eyes away as the flash of a knife caught the corner of her eye. She dodged instinctively and grabbed the wrist of her attacker, using their momentum to carry them on and bury the knife into the stomach of another approaching Death Eater. The wielder snarled with rage and spun to attack her again. Close proximity wand combat was difficult, trying to get the motion right when she hardly had room to move her wrist. Simple. Deadly. With the tiniest flick, she cast upward. A tiny thread of scarlet bloomed beneath the jaw of the Death Eater before his head toppled off. Blood spurted across Hermione's face.

It was in her eyes, and she could taste it as she heard the knife clatter to the ground.

Hermione wiped the blood from her face, spitting, and watched as a huge, unmasked Death Eater grabbed hold of Ron and sank his teeth into Ron's shoulder. Harry, Fred, and Charlie all shot stunners, but they bounced off the Death Eater. Werewolf. Ron was screaming in agony as he tried to wrench himself free. The werewolf jerked his head up, tearing Ron's shoulder open.

The full moon was a day away. The spell power required to take down a werewolf at that point would be considerable. At least seven more stunners.

Too long for Ron.

Spells to bring down a werewolf; Hermione scrambled to think of one. She reached deep inside of her magic and hissed, " *Carbonescrere* ."

Something in her twisted.

The black curse shot from her wand. It was like a cloud of black smoke that zipped across the field and exploded around the Death Eater. The werewolf froze for a second and collapsed into dust. Ron dropped to the ground.

As Hermione stared, everything inside her went cold and dark.

She stumbled and gripped her chest. As the world swam back into view, she noticed something moving toward her. She turned, jumping back.

It felt like being punched violently in the ribs. Hermione gasped, trying to inhale and looked down. There was a knife driven to the hilt in the right side of her chest. If she had turned a split second later, it might have gone into her heart, but—as she studied it with surprise—she thought it had probably missed anything immediately vital. Her healer mind couldn't turn itself off. Her wand slipped from her fingers, and her hands darted down to close over those of the Death Eater who was still holding it. Stopping him before he could try to twist it, or pull it out and stab her again.

She felt the bones in her left hand crack as she gripped his hands in hers tightly and—without letting herself stop to think how much it might hurt to move with a blade still inside her— drove her knee viciously between his legs. He crumpled to the ground, his hold on the hilt loosening. Hermione stumbled away, gasping raggedly.

Where had her wand fallen? There was blood in her eyes. She shook her head, trying to clear her vision.

She looked down at her chest again. Her right lung was punctured, and she suspected her liver had been nicked. From the angle she was looking down at it, it was hard to tell. She saw her wand. She tried to reach for it without bending her torso. As her fingers closed around the handle, she felt someone dig their fingers into her braided hair and drag her up onto her feet until she was dangling in the air, her toes barely touching the ground. "I remember you, Mudblood." Rabastan Lestrange chuckled as he pulled off his Death Eater mask. His eyes dropped down, and he noticed the knife still buried in her chest. "Look at that. Someone already got started on you." She tried to curse him, but he batted her wand away. She heard it clatter onto the ground.

Her knife, she needed to reach it.

"How many times do you think I can stab you before the light goes out in your eyes?" he asked before he jerked the blade from her chest.

Hermione gave a ragged gasp as she tried to stop him. The right side of her body was suddenly slick with the blood sliding down her torso. Rabastan dragged the blade up her chest until it pressed over her heart.

Hermione tried to wrench her head free as she attempted to pull out her knife without drawing his attention.

He pressed the tip in and hit bone. He shifted the blade until it found a space between her ribs. Hermione's eyes widened as she stared up at him.

"Here? Or should l start lower?" His voice was taunting. He was unconcerned with the fighting around him.

Hermione didn't know whether to try to reach for her knife or stop him from stabbing her in the heart.

Was there even a point in making a choice? She could feel herself bleeding to death.

He started to push it in slowly. As the tip of the knife began cutting into her skin, Rabastan stilled. His hold on her hair loosened, and his expression went slack as he dropped dead at her feet.

Hermione collapsed with him and caught herself with one hand.

Behind Rabastan, just beyond the anti-apparition point, a masked Death Eater was standing alone in the field.

Several Death Eaters nearby froze and turned with surprise when Rabastan fell.

They were dead before they could raise their wands.

Hermione just stared. She suspected her punctured lung was collapsing. She pressed her hand against the wound to keep herself from haemorrhaging and to prevent air from seeping into her chest cavity.

She watched blankly as the Death Eater who had just appeared began making his way across the field.

It was Draco. She'd never seen him fight, not really. But the style was still familiar. He was as deadly as she'd imagined. The influence of Bellatrix Lestrange's training was obvious. The fluidity of movement. The wake of bodies he left behind him as he stalked across the field. Bellatrix's unpredictable style had been driven by her sadism—her insanity.

Draco's style was brutal efficiency.

He wasn't concerned with maiming or causing pain. He didn't want prisoners. He killed everyone. He showed no hesitation as he mowed through the panicking Death Eaters around him. The ways he could conceive of to rapidly kill people was terrifying. It was entirely a numbers game. Minimum effort, high return.

It was impossible that he had ever fought to full potential before. If a Death Eater had ever fought that way before, everyone would have known about it. He cast a spell on the ground that turned the radius surrounding him into liquid. Fifteen Death Eaters immediately vanished beneath the surface. Screaming. He cancelled it, and left them behind to be suffocated by the earth around them.

He cast curse after curse after curse, most of them nonverbally. The Death Eaters steadily dropped.

He conjured a flock of dozens of silver hummingbirds. Several Death Eaters hesitated, visibly confused. Draco whipped his wand forward, and the tiny birds shot through the air like a hail of bullets, burying themselves into the throats and chests of anyone nearby without a powerful shield. He called the birds back, dripping blood, and shot them off again.

He was within a few feet of Hermione.

He reached out and grabbed her by the left wrist. She gave a low scream as she felt her damaged bones fracture in his grip. He pulled something out of his robes. Holding it high over his head, he activated it. It was like all the air and sound in the area was suddenly sucked away. Deadly silent. Everyone around them dropped to the ground, gasping and clawing at their throats. Hermione was screaming in pain and panic. She felt her wrist breaking as she tried to get free. The Death Eaters were gasping silently for air as they suffocated. "Harry! Harry. Ron! Stop. Stop! You can't kill everyone! Stop, Draco!" she was screaming. Their faces were turning blue. The struggling was coming to an end. The bodies went still.

"Draco, stop!" She renewed her struggles to tear herself free and felt the bones in her hand shatter.

“Stop!”

“You idiot,” he snarled through his mask, releasing her wrist. “Wait here.” He tossed the dark artifact onto the ground. It sizzled and twisted up into a heap of scrap metal. He stalked over to Harry, Ron, Fred, Charlie, Remus, and Tonks. He performed a reviving spell on each of them followed by a muttered “obliviate” before he levitated the unconscious bodies up behind him as he turned back. He summoned her wand up off the ground and dragged her up by the arm. It was hard to breathe. Moving was agonising. Her left wrist felt like it was being crucioed. Blood was streaming down her side.

It got harder and harder to breathe as Draco pulled her across the field.

She needed to seal the puncture. As soon as she could find someone—someone who could perform the spells to keep her from bleeding out. Who could remove the air from her chest cavity.

If she could apparate. If she could apparate to Grimmauld Place.

If she could.

She stumbled. Her head was feeling light, and it was hard to think straight. She tried to breathe but felt as though she couldn’t.

Draco dropped everyone just outside the anti-apparition wards. She moved toward their bodies. She didn’t know what resuscitation spell Draco had used. Before she could take a step, Draco’s grip tightened and he apparated away with her. They landed in the shack. He immediately let go of her and ripped his mask and gloves off. She slumped against the door. “You—you can’t leave them there,” she rasped. “They’ll wake in less than a minute,” he said, his face twisting with fury. Kneeling on the ground, he used the tip of his wand to draw a series of runes on the floor. The runes glowed for a moment, and a trapdoor appeared. Jerking it open, he reached down and pulled out what seemed to be an entire hospital worth of healing supplies. Draco turned to look at her. His face was white with rage. “Can you last long enough for me to get a healer for you?” he asked. His voice was shaking. She shook her head. “You’ll have to tell me how to do it. I’ve never used complex healing charms,” he said, pulling supplies out. She dragged herself up from the wall and gave a small gesture toward her right side with her broken wrist. “My liver. It’s—where the blood is coming from. I think. There’s air in my chest cavity. It’s collapsing my lung.” He conjured a stretcher and helped her down onto it.

She gulped a Blood-Replenishing Potion before she had him cast a diagnostic, so she could confirm the injuries were what she thought. He had all the necessary potions to help stabilise her and keep her from going into shock.

He was steady-handed. He cut off her clothes and performed the spells to staunch the bleeding and repair the blood vessels and biliary ducts in her liver as it started healing, following her instructions carefully. Then he handed her another vial of Blood- Replenishing Potion.

The spell to siphon out the air collapsing her lung was tricky. She had trouble showing him the wand movement. Her hands were still shaking despite the pain relief she’d taken. “It’s more subtle than that,” she tried to explain. “Just the faintest sideways shiver of the tip, or it will pull too hard and damage the tissue.”

Wincing, she put both hands around his and slowly moved his left hand in the necessary motion as

she said the incantation in time with each movement.

He got it right on the third try.

“And then after you repair the lung tissue it’s—just a regular healing charm to fix the diaphragmatic muscle and close the incision,” she instructed when she could finally breathe again.” She slumped down to recover while he cleaned the blood off her. It was crusted on her face, in her eyelashes.

“What were you doing there?” he asked in a low, shaking voice as she turned and transfigured a piece of dressing into a shirt and started trying to pull it over her head.

“Harry asked me come,” she said with a small shrug. “I told you, we need Ron.” “You aren’t experienced in combat,” he said. He was pale, and his hands were trembling faintly as he helped her pull the shirt over her head, “Why are they bringing you out again without even giving you a partner?” Hermione didn’t look at him. She swallowed and slid her right hand down the sleeve. “They needed a healer. Our other healer lost her foot foraging. I was chosen because I could walk faster.” He drew a sharp breath.

“You knew it was a trap,” he said. “You knew it. But you went anyway. Rabastan’s prison ambush. No one actually thought the Order would be idiotic enough to fall for it. It was a training simulation for the rookies.” “Harry was going to go.” “So?” “Harry is the point of this war. If he dies, it’s over. I will always follow him. Strategically, I’m a casualty we can afford. Harry is not. If I improve his odds at all, it’s worth it,” she replied in a steady voice as she twisted gingerly and lifted her broken wrist up to slide down the sleeve.

“You weren’t saving Potter. You were saving Weasley.” Hermione twitched her shoulder. “Ron is critical. Harry—needs Ron. If something happens to Ron, it’ll break him. He needs Ron to want to win.” “What about you? Doesn’t Potter need you?” Draco said. His eyes glittered with rage.

Hermione looked away. “Not like he needs Ron. I’m—not like that to him.” She swallowed the lump in her throat.

“The Weasleys—,“ she started, and then she gave a short sigh. “They’re his family. They’re everything he wants. To win, he has to be able to see himself with them afterward. That—is what drives him. If he loses it—stops believing that he’ll get it—he won’t keep going. He won’t be able to.” “I thought you were part of the Trio. Won’t Potter despair if he loses you?” “No,” she said, glancing away. “He’d grieve, he’ll be angry. But I’m—I’m not emotionally vital. I was never very good at—,” her lips twitched, “—Ron connects to Harry emotionally. Harry is driven by his emotions.” “So—what? Potter drags you into a firefight you have no experience trying to survive because you’re expendable enough?” “Ron comes first. Harry will always take care of him first. He doesn’t think clearly when the people he regards as family are in danger. He doesn’t realise he’s risking others,” she said, lifting her chin. “He’s always been that way.” Draco stared at her. “So who cares for you, Granger, if Potter doesn’t?” She blinked.

“I don’t need anyone to care for me,” she said stiffly, but her voice shook. “It wasn’t an accident, Draco. I *chose* to reduce my casualty value.” His expression hardened. “You let yourself become expendable to Potter.” “The more weaknesses Harry has, the more vulnerable the entire Resistance is.” She hadn’t thought Draco could look angrier than he already did, but he suddenly looked ready to explode. “When I think I can’t hate Potter more, he finds a new way to prove me wrong,” he said, pulling out several more potions and handing them to her. She tried to pull the corks out with one

hand but couldn't manage it. She was pretty sure if she had to move her left wrist again, she would faint. "What happened to your left hand?" he abruptly asked, snatching back a vial and unstoppering it for her. "You—broke it." He seemed to get paler. "It was already injured," she said in clarification, "I got hit by that acid curse. By the time I managed to counter it, the bones were pretty much wrecked. You just happened to grab it."

"You should have told me."

He reached into his robes and pulled out the kit she'd given him for Christmas. He snatched the analgesic from its slot, doused a cloth, and wrapped it around her wrist and hand. Hermione nearly gasped with relief as the burning subsided. "Do you need me to remove the bones?" he asked after a moment as he watched her cradle her wrist against her chest. She looked up at him. "Could you? I—I was going to do it myself, when I got a chance."

Removing bones with precision, especially shards, was a painful process. Unless she wanted to regrow her whole arm, it was going to be a slow ordeal that would be difficult to remain focused and steady-handed throughout. She'd planned to deal with it after she went back to check on Ron. "I know the spellwork. Do you want me to stun you?" he asked. "N-no. I should stay awake, unless you already know all the names of the bones in the hand and wrist." "No," he said, glancing away, his mouth pressed into a hard line.

Unwrapping her hand again, she cast a diagnostic spell over it and surveyed the damage. Aside from the deep pockets the acid had burned into the flesh, there were four bones that had been crushed and another six with varying levels of corrosion, including her ulna. She'd have to debone half her forearm.

She stared at it for several minutes before drawing a sharp breath and looking away.

"The fifth metacarpal first. *Quinque metacarpus*." *"Quinque metacarpus ossios dispersimus."* The sharp stabbing pain as the bone in Hermione's hand abruptly vanished nearly made her scream. She dropped her head against Draco's shoulder and shuddered. Pain without the adrenaline surge of battle was harder to handle. "Then the hamate. *Os hamatum*." She shivered against his shoulder, trying to brace herself. She was crying into his robes by the time he had removed all the bone shards. Half her forearm and most of her palm were largely boneless and lay puddled in her lap.

Draco pulled a bottle of skele-gro out. She gagged it down and then winced as the stabbing, needle-like sensation of the regrowing bones enveloped her arm. He poured Essence of Dittany across her entire arm to repair the pockets of corroded tissue. She was tempted to scream at him.

"Don't!" She tried to grab the vial away from him. "It's a waste. I can heal them with spellwork after the bones regrow."

He glared at her. "Shut up." She fell silent while he doused her arm a second time and then rummaged through more materials from his supplies and assembled a magical cast with surprising efficiency. "Why do you have all this?" she asked, surveying all the supplies as he wrapped the frame around her hand and up around her elbow, so that the bones could regrow straight. "I got it for you," he said. She stared at him in surprise. "After Hampshire, I was worried you'd show up injured again. I thought if I had everything you might need on hand, I'd worry less." Hermione's heart hurt inside her chest as he helped her get the sling of the cast up over her head.

“But—this is a lot. This is practically a casualty ward’s entire inventory list.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t know what kinds of things were crucial for casualty healing at the time. I researched it. Then I got a long lecture on healing common battle injuries as a Christmas present last year. It helped me round it out with anything I’d missed.”

Hermione blushed.

“You could become a healer,” she told him. “You have a natural talent for it.” The corner of his mouth twitched faintly. “That’s one of the most ironic things anyone has ever said to me,” he said. The conversation stalled. “I have to get back. Ron’s injured. And Harry too,” she said in a soft voice as she moved to stand. Draco stood up, his eyes growing cold. “Don’t ever go on another mission.” “That’s not your call,” she said, meeting his eyes.

He paled and his jaw tensed. “Remind Moody if the Order wants my continued assistance, they will keep you alive.” Hermione stilled, and her mouth twisted as she looked away from him. “You are doing this for your mother, Draco.”

He turned her firmly by the shoulders and stared down at her. “She is dead,” he said. “You are not. My loyalty was to those least responsible for her suffering. However, if the Order has decided you’re an affordable casualty and sends you out to be mowed down as battle fodder, I will not be noble. I have no compunction against exacting dual revenge. I will make Potter pay if he gets you killed.” Hermione froze. This was dangerous.

She hadn’t factored for this risk. She knew that Draco’s loyalty wasn’t based on ideology; it was purely a sense of personal loyalty. He hated Harry, he just hated Voldemort more. Hermione’s careless, emotional confession had just given him grounds to waver. He was possessive. She was his. Harry had endangered her.

She should have felt panicked. She should have been cold. She should have reminded him of his Vow. Reminded him that she would always choose the Order first until they won. If he wanted her, he would have to wait.

It was what she should do.

She stared up at him, and her shoulders shook. She was so tired. Life had been cold for such a long time.

Her fingers twitched. She almost reached for him.

Then she slowly curled her hand into a fist and slid it behind her back. “Don’t—don’t do this, Draco.” Her voice broke. “You are not expendable,” he said in a low, desperate voice. “You don’t get to push everyone away so that they’ll feel comfortable with using you and letting you die.”

Hermione’s hand was shaking, and her throat felt as though there were a stone lodged inside it. She dropped her head and drew a deep breath.

Ron is hurt. And Harry. She steeled herself and tried to twist free. “This is war. It’s not some sort of tragic self-condemnation to be expendable. It’s a strategic liability not to be. I would've thought you’d have realised it was the case with me. A healer isn’t going to win the war; that’s why I was available to trade. I even have a replacement in the hospital ward now—because of you. I had to train her.” She gave a bitter laugh. “You did this to me. You made me as expendable as I am.” She

choked back a sob. “And you didn’t even want me either.”

He flinched and his hold loosened.

“I have to go now.” Her voice shook as she stepped away.

Draco caught her by her right arm and pulled her back.

“You are not replaceable,” he said. His hands were shaking as he gripped her. “You are not required to make your death convenient. You are allowed to be important to people. The reason I took that fucking Vow was to keep you alive. To keep you safe.” She tried to pull away from him, but he wouldn’t let go. She twisted, trying to get away. She had to go, because he kept staring at her with desperation written across his face, and it was breaking her inside.

She sobbed and—before she had time to think—twisted the fingers of her right hand into his robes, pulled him closer, and kissed him.

*Flashback 28*

**March 2003**

Draco cradled her face in his hands as he returned her kiss, carefully pulling her closer without hurting her left arm. She was half-crying as she kissed him.

She traced her fingers along his neck and pulled at the curve of his jaw to draw him closer. Trying to memorise every detail of him: the scent of the forest and papyrus scrolls, his pulse under her fingertips, his lips pressed against hers, the taste of him.

She had earned this. She pressed her cheek against his hand as his lips caressed hers.

After several minutes, she wrenched herself away. “I have to go,” she said.

He didn’t try to stop her, but he reached for her again before catching himself. He stared at her and drew a sharp breath through his teeth.

“Come back. Come back to me—if you ever need anything,” he finally said, pulling his hand back.

Hermione stared at him and wanted to say she would. She forced herself to swallow the words. “I have to go,” she repeated, forcing herself to step away.

He stood, watching her leave.

She took a steadying breath and apparated back to the Tonks house. She knocked quickly on the door. It swung open. Fred stood in the doorway, staring suspiciously down at her. “What are your parents' names?” he asked. “Wendell and Monica Wilkins, they live in Australia,” she answered, meeting his eyes steadily. He slumped with relief and dragged her into his arms. She was crushed against his chest as he pulled her inside. “Good Merlin, we thought we lost you. You weren’t there when we woke up.” “I—I was hemorrhaging. I couldn’t wait. I had to find someone who could fix it,” she said by way of vague explanation. Fred shook his head, his expression bewildered. “I don’t understand; one minute we were fighting, and then suddenly we woke up, thrown all the way past the wards. My whole body feels like I was crushed by an erumpant. All the Death Eaters were dead. You were gone. Harry and Ron freaked and wanted to start a search.” “Someone must have tried to use some dark curse that backfired,” Hermione said, pulling out her kit and handing Fred a restorative and a vial of pain relief.

“That’s our best guess,” Fred said, knocking back the potions with a grimace. “Freakishly lucky. I can’t believe how many of ‘em there were. Ron’s been chewing out Harry nonstop since we got here.” He looked seriously at Hermione, “His shoulder’s pretty bad.” Hermione nodded grimly. “I saw it happen.” He gave her a long look. “That was your curse that saved him, wasn’t it?” She gave a short nod. “This close to a full moon, there weren’t many options.”

“Well. You won’t hear any complaints from me. After what happened to George, I say we kill the bastards. Harry’s a bit freaked over it. But he was a right arse to ask you to walk into something like

that your first time back into the field. I'm glad you weren't killed;I don't care what it took for you to manage it." He rested a hand on her shoulder.

She nodded. "I've been advocating for lethal curses for years. If anyone was surprised that I used them, they haven't been paying attention." "Ron's in there. I'm knackered." Fred swung a door open. Ron sat in a bed. His shoulder had been sloppily bandaged. How so many Order members could be fighting for so many years without being able to perform basic emergency healing still baffled Hermione. "Mione! You're alive." Ron tried to climb out of bed and looked on the verge of tears as he saw her.

"I'm sorry," she said as she hurried over and pushed him firmly back into the bed before removing the bandages with the wave of her wand. "I should have gotten back sooner."

Harry gripped her shoulder, pulled her back and hugged her for a minute. "I'm so sorry. I thought they caught you. I looked through the bodies, and you weren't there. I'm so, so sorry. I never thought there'd be so many."

Hermione pulled away. "I need to treat Ron, Harry." Her voice was tight as she twisted free.

Ron's shoulder was mangled. The untransformed werewolf had bitten deep into the muscle of his shoulder, tearing huge swaths of flesh loose. The damage was severe. Someone, presumably Remus, appeared to have dumped an entire container of powdered silver and dittany over the wound. "Where did you go?" Harry asked, "We looked everywhere for you."

"I got hurt," she said, working to keep her voice low. She cleared away the blood, crusted powder and herbs to survey the extent of the injury. "I was bleeding out, and I needed someone with healing experience." She handed Ron a vial of pain relief potion. The moment after he swallowed, she cast cleansing charm over the area. He gave an agonized gasp.

Mouths were horribly dirty, especially one belonging to a werewolf with cannibalistic urges.

"Who?" Harry asked.

"A third-party Moody put me in contact with," she said without looking up. "Bastards," Ron muttered, wincing as Hermione crushed up Wolfsbane into a poultice and spread it into the deepest tears in his shoulder. "Anyone who stays neutral in this war is a coward. What do they think will happen if we lose? I wouldn't trust them." "Not everyone is cut out to fight, Ron," she said quietly, feeling obliged to defend the fictitious healer.

"I know it. I've been reminding Harry." Ron gave Harry a hard look which Harry returned obstinately. "We all got out, didn't we?" Harry retorted, dropping into a chair next to the bed. "Probably wouldn't have if Hermione hadn't fixed you up before we went back out." "The Order needs Hermione more as a healer than you needed her for your suicidal rescue idea," Ron said between clenched teeth. "Moody and Kingsley will say the same as soon as they hear what you did." Hermione pulled the Wolfsbane poultice away and used the tip of her wand to siphon away all the poison that had been pulled up. Then she sprinkled another thick layer of powdered silver and dittany across the wound and set to wrapping it. Her arm was shaking from exhaustion as she tried to wrap the gauze firmly with one hand. After failing again on her fifth try, she stepped back and rummaged for a strengthening draught which she struggled to unstopper with one hand. Finally she pulled the cork out with her teeth, spat it onto the table, and drank the potion. The trembling in her

hand eased. “Harry…,” she said in a low voice. “I need you to give me a hand. I can’t manage Ron’s dressing with just one. I need you to maintain the tension as I wrap it in order to keep the dittany in place.” Harry stood and came over. “What happened to your arm?” He reached out and touched the cast tentatively. “Just a curse.” She shrugged. “I had to remove the bones. They’re regrowing now.” Harry winced. “I’m sorry.” “It’s fine. It wasn’t life-threatening,” she said. “It just takes a while to get everything restored. Now, hold this here while I wrap. And then, when I bring it around, I need you to hold it here too. We don’t want too much tension, just enough to keep it covered and everything in place.” When Ron’s shoulder was finally properly bandaged, Hermione started working on all the remaining injuries from his imprisonment. She couldn’t figure out how to get the shackle on his right wrist off, so she worked around it. When she finished, she rested her hand lightly on his arm. “It’s not going to heal,” she told Ron soberly, nodding toward his shoulder. He was pale, his freckles standing out starkly. “I know. Remus told me.” “This close to the full moon, you’re going to feel it every month.” He gave a sharp nod. “Remus may have mentioned; we’ll need to isolate you tomorrow night. Until we know how severely it’s going to affect you during the full moon. This—this is going to change you. You’re going to have to be careful. When you get angry, you won’t necessarily realize how much stronger and aggressive you’ll be prone to get until you do something really dangerous. You—you could accidentally kill someone.” “He won’t,” Harry said defensively.

Hermione’s jaw tensed. “Ron isn’t the first person I’ve treated for bites, Harry. It’s not going to be his fault, but if we decide to be careless, he could hurt someone. Bites this close to a full moon have consequences. When the wolf can’t emerge with the moon, it tends to just simmer beneath the surface, waiting for opportunities to lash out. Ron is potentially dangerous, and we need to be prepared for that.” “Well, maybe you should have gotten him out like we planned.” Harry crossed his arms and jerked his chin.

Hermione flinched, and the room swam slightly as she felt the blood drain away from her head.

“Harry, shut up!” Ron turned scarlet with rage. “It was your fucking stupid plan! Hermione shouldn’t have been there. How the bloody hell was she supposed to have gotten me out?”

Harry was raring for a fight. Hermione could see it in his face. He was always angry after someone got hurt. And now, with Ginny away, he didn’t have anyone to console or distract him.

He was lashing out in guilt. Because he’d never known how to deal with what he felt. Bleeding to death from the pain of all he couldn’t stop himself from feeling.

“I did everything I could to protect Ron.”

“Yeah, I saw your idea of protecting him. What was that curse you used?” Harry asked. She met his eyes. “I found it researching. It’s one of the few spells that can kill a werewolf fast enough to stop them, aside from an Unforgivable.”

“It was Dark,” Harry said, his green eyes flashing. “Probably one of the darkest spells I’ve ever seen.” “I thought Ron was worth it.” If she’d had the magic to spare, she would have hexed Harry across the room.

“We could have brought it down with stunners,” Harry said.

“Really? You were willing to bet Ron’s life on that? After all the risk to save him?” Her voice was

shaking with rage. “I knew the consequences. I accepted them. I used it.” “So what? Suddenly you’re an expert in the battlefield? Ripping apart your soul rather than believe that we can win with Light magic?” The hurt and fear in Harry’s eyes was visible through his anger. “It gets into your soul, Hermione. Dark Magic. That darkness will stay in you after the war. It never goes away. It’s inside you. In your magic.”

He took her by the shoulders, and she could feel his hands shaking. He looked ready to cry.

“I don’t care.” Hermione jerked free from Harry and pushed her jaw up. “I want to win. I don’t care what my soul ends up looking like.” Then she scoffed. "You were more than willing to risk my life; I don’t see how my soul is somehow more important."

Harry took a sharp step back and was silent as he stared at her. “Well,” he finally said, “if that’s how little you believe in us then you aren’t someone whose help I need. Trust me, I won’t ever ask again.” He turned on his heel and stormed out of the room. Ron stared at Hermione as she slumped against the wall. His expression was sad and resigned.

“I don’t understand why you do this,” he said after a moment. “Do you still believe we’ll only win if we use the Dark Arts?” Hermione’s arm was throbbing from the bone regrowth, and she was fighting back tears. “We aren’t the side trying to kill everyone. Considering the number of people we’re protecting, there are very few means I wouldn’t consider worth it,” she said, blinking her eyes rapidly so they’d stop pricking.

“You know Harry can’t,” Ron said seriously. “If he thinks that he’s going to have to go Dark to win, it’ll destroy everything he’s fighting for. He wants to be normal after this. He won’t have that if he goes Dark.” “I know. I just want him to stop getting in everyone else’s way.” Ron stared at her in silence for several moments. “You think everyone else should. Me and you and the rest of DA and the Order.” “I’m in the hospital ward, Ron,” she said, too tired to gesture or even move as she spoke. “Whether you win a battle or lose it, all I see is the cost. Sometimes it seems like you and Harry don’t realise how few lives we can still afford to lose. This war is bigger than Harry and his family getting to be normal afterward. What do you think will happen to the Resistance if we lose? What about the Muggle world? Harry doesn’t have anyone in the Muggle world he cares about. You don’t know anyone out there at all. But my parents are out there. My classmates from primary school. My grandparents and cousins. If my soul is the price of protecting them—of protecting you, that’s—that’s not a price. That’s a bargain.” She straightened, feeling like she was about to fall over. “I have to go check up on everyone else,” she said, stumbling out of the room.

It was mostly simple injuries. When fighting Death Eaters, injuries tended to either be lethal or minor.

Charlie was mostly bruised and grazed with a curse that wouldn’t stop bleeding. He’d taken two Blood-Replenishing Potions waiting for her to come back. Fred had a concussion and internal bruising that Hermione got repaired in short order.

Tonks’ wrist was badly sprained. It only took a few minutes for Hermione to perform the spellwork and apply a potion. “Glad to see you’re still kicking,” Tonks said, staring at Hermione with a serious expression. Tonks’ hair was dark and limp; there were streaks of grey in it.

Hermione gave a wan smile as she massaged the potion into Tonks’ skin to reduce the swelling. “Who trained you?” Tonks lowered her voice and leaned forward. Hermione stilled slightly before

she continued massaging Tonks' wrist. "I was all over Europe for training."

"Don't play dumb with me; that's not what I was talking about. I remember how you used to fight," Tonks said, eyeing Hermione. "You're completely different now. You were deadly. And despite your inexperience in the actual field, it was obvious you know a lot more than you possibly should. Someone dangerous trained you." Hermione said nothing. "How many people did you kill today, Hermione? Ten? Fifteen? Do you even know?" Hermione's jaw started quivering, and she ground her teeth together to stop it. "Have you ever killed anyone before? You haven't. I'd remember that. Today was the first time, and you haven't even had time to think about it, have you?" Hermione flinched. "What have you gotten yourself into?" Tonks asked, reaching out and resting her hand on Hermione's.

There was a pause.

"It was just supposed to be precautionary. I didn't expect to use it all so suddenly," Hermione finally managed to say. "Who? Who do you know that's that deadly? Moody trained me, so I know it's not his style. Or Amelia Bones'. Or Shacklebolt's." "I don't have permission to share the information. Moody is aware. You can verify with him."

Tonks blinked and stared at Hermione for several seconds.

"That curse, to save Ron. I've heard about it—you went deep into the Dark Arts with that. Make sure you aren't alone; whoever you've got that you go to, you should probably send a message to." Hermione nodded absently. The pain in her arm was growing distracting. Internally, she was beginning to feel worn thin; a symptom that she had pushed beyond what strengthening potions could counter. "Is Remus alright?" Hermione asked. She still hadn't examined him or Harry, but she knew Tonks would have checked Remus as soon as they got back. "Yep. I checked him carefully. You know how quick he heals from almost anything. He went to report to Kingsley that we got Ron back." "Alright." Hermione nodded, struggling to stand. "Hermione," Tonks caught her as she stumbled. "What happened to you?" "It's nothing. I'm fine. I'm just not used to being in the field. I'm not as fit as the rest of you," Hermione said, trying to step away. "You disappeared when the rest of us were unconscious," Tonks' eyes were narrowed and then widened. "Did you cast the curse that killed everyone?" "No," Hermione said quickly, shaking her head. "I don't know what that was." "But you know how it happened, don't you? Your teacher—came for you." Tonks looked suddenly tense. "How injured were you? Who is it that you have in your pocket with that much firepower?" Hermione grasped for an explanation that would satisfy the former auror. "Talk to Moody. If he'll clear you, I'll tell you anything you want to know." "Since when are you so classified?" Tonks said, her eyes wide with wonder. "You know I can't tell you that either," Hermione said, pulling her arm away. "Fine," Tonks said. "Tell me how injured you were then. I'm assuming that's not classified." Hermione couldn't think of any reason to lie. "I got stabbed. In the lung. It nicked my liver too. It's repaired now." "Shit! That doesn't mean you should be standing. You know better than me that just because Muggle injuries can be fixed fast doesn't mean they don't take a huge toll physically. You should be in a bed, and we should be coming to you," Tonks hissed. "If I told anyone, it would raise questions l can't answer," Hermione said steadily. "It'll be fine. I'll just need a lot of sleep once I finish. I only need to see Harry. Then I'll rest." "Alright," Tonks stepped back and let her go, but her eyes were still suspicious and

concerned. As soon as Hermione got out of the room, she leaned against the wall. She tried to gather any reserves she had left before going to find Harry. He was on the roof, staring out over the pond

below while he smoked. There were dozens of cigarette butts scattered around him.

He noticed her but didn't make any move to come to her. She climbed out of the window awkwardly with only one arm to support her. She almost lost her balance but caught herself determinedly. If she fell off the roof in her current condition, she might die. She steeled herself and made her way to Harry, trying not to look down.

"What happened to us, Hermione?" he asked when she got close. "A war," she said, reaching out and turning his face toward her. There was a gash on his head. His pale skin was faintly red from the blood he'd washed off. His expression was sad, tired, and angry.

"Who changed? Was it you or me?" he asked as she laced her fingers through his hair and pushed it aside so she could close the wound.

"Me," she admitted.

"Why? Do you think I won't be able to do it?" he said. "Are you trying to brace yourself that I'll fail?"

She cast a diagnostic charm on him. He had two fractured ribs and bruising on his abdomen. She pushed him back so he'd lay down before she started healing him.

"I think you can do it. But—the prophecy. It's a coin toss. After Dumbledore died—," she faltered slightly.

"Death is just one curse away from us all," she said after a moment. "I can't just sit back and watch, waiting for fifty-fifty odds to land and assume I know the outcome. Not when there are so many people depending on us. What you have, the way you love people... it's pure, it's powerful. But—how many times have you killed Tom now? As a baby, because of your mother. In first and second year. But he's still here. He's still fighting you. I don't want to assume anything is enough."

"You don't think Good can just win," Harry said. The reproach in his voice was heavy.

"Everyone who wins say they were good, but they're the ones who write the history. I haven't seen anything indicating that it was actually moral superiority that made a difference," she said as she murmured the spells to repair the fractures.

"You're talking about Muggle history though. Magic is different. The magical world is different," Harry said fiercely. Hermione shook her head, and Harry's expression grew bitter. He looked up at the sky. Hermione began spreading a bruise paste over Harry's stomach and ribs in small circular motions.

"You used to be different," Harry said, "You used to be more righteous about things than me. What happened to S.P.E.W? That girl would never have said Dark Magic was worth the cost. What happened?"

"That girl died in a hospital ward trying to save Colin Creevey."

"I was there when Colin died too, Hermione. And I didn't change."

"I was always willing to do whatever it took, Harry. All those adventures of ours in school. Once I was in, I was in. Maybe you just never noticed how far I was willing to go for you."

“Not for me.” Harry said, shaking his head. “You don’t get to tell yourself you’re doing this for me. I would never ask it of you.” “I know,” she said, looking away. “This isn’t for you. It’s for everyone else. You have to do what you need to to win. So do I.” “You’re pushing yourself away,” Harry said in a hard voice as he sat up. “Maybe you don’t think I see it, but I do. I just don’t understand why. You were like my sister. But now—it’s like every time there’s a crack in our friendship, you walk up and drive a wedge into it. I don’t understand—why are you doing that?”

He sounded on the verge of tears. His eyes were so hurt and angry as he stared at her. She felt herself waver. If she admitted it now, maybe it would fix things. Maybe there was still a chance. The space Ginny had filled and concealed—he was realising it, feeling how far away Hermione had moved. Her first friend. Her best friend. He was reaching out for her. If she reached back— She stared sadly at him. “Those cracks were always there, Harry. The person I am, she was always there. The war is just making you see her.” His face shuttered. “Alright then.” He stood up and went back into the house.

Hermione sat for several minutes, trying to muster up the energy to climb back across the roof.

She found an armchair and curled up in it, so tired that even the stabbing pain of her arm couldn’t keep her from sleeping. When she jerked awake hours later, she felt icy. She was freezing cold, to the point that her teeth were chattering. It had been early afternoon when she’d fallen asleep, but the house had grown dark and quiet.

She shuddered with cold, grasped for her wand, and cast a warming charm on herself. It didn’t provide her with any relief from the iciness she felt. She felt—watched. As though there were something in the darkness staring at her. At the base of her spine, and climbing slowly upward like icy tendrils, was a sense of dull pain. Like she was being infected with something that was trying to numb her as it crept through her system. Her hand was shaking as she cast a diagnostic on herself. She must have overlooked a curse.

There was nothing. The painful, icy sensation felt like it was spreading. Blooming through her body into her sternum and across her chest until breathing felt painful. It was terrifying and awful but there was also a sort of draw to surrender. Pain for relief. Like sitting in the kitchen, cutting lines until it hurt more than everything else did.

Pain like liberation. Like the taste of blood. She stood sharply. It was the aftereffects of the Dark Magic she had used. Self-destructive tendencies. Hallucinations. Now as she thought about it, the sensations were familiar. Tonks had been right. She should be with someone. Someone who would help her hold on. She stumbled down the stairs. It was the middle of the night. She made her way to the room Charlie had been in. They barely got on together, but he’d let her hold his hand. She was so cold. He could talk to her and help her keep focused—

Empty. She checked Fred’s. Empty.

She moved on. Ron was asleep. Moaning in pain. She poured a Dreamless Sleep draught down his throat. As she watched him settle, she pulled out a potion to help reset the ligaments and tendons in her hand and swallowed it. Harry was asleep in the chair next to Ron. Harry hadn’t slept since Ron’s capture. Remus had the full moon the next night; Tonks would be with him.

She wandered back out of the room and wondered what to do. The coldness swallowing her was so painful it hurt to even breathe. She wavered and nearly let herself sink into it. “*Come back to me—if*

*you ever need anything."* She forced herself out the front door and apparated to Whitecroft. She stepped toward the door, and her fingers grazed the knob, then she froze. The lights were out. Of course—he wouldn't be there. It was just a rendezvous point. He didn't live there. It had been hours since she'd left. He was probably asleep. Somewhere with a bed.

Or he could be busy.

She wasn't supposed to call him unless it was an emergency. She'd promised she wouldn't. She had given him her word.

She didn't get to call him because she'd had a bad day.

She'd risk his cover—compromise him—endanger the Order.

She jerked her hand back and turned away.

If she could apparate again—there was always someone awake at a Grimmauld Place. She gripped her wand and closed her eyes.

It felt like something grabbed hold of her head. Her knees buckled. Everything vanished.

When the world slowly swam back into focus, she realized she was lying on her back. She stared up at the sky. The stars glittered overhead, dimmed by the moon. Cold.

The day has been so long.

Her skin was crawling. Hurting. Like there was something inside her. In her magic. She wanted to slice it out. If she could just find the spot. She could carve it out with one of her knives—-so it would stop—stop crawling inside her.

She dug her fingers into her chest and pulled at it.

"Granger—what did you do to yourself?" She became conscious of being lifted off the ground. Hot hands closing around her body, driving away the cold. She was so cold. She burrowed into the heat. She was delirious, because Draco was there, dressed in Muggle clothing. She had never seen him in anything but black robes.

She pressed herself against him, and he felt like a furnace, driving away the crawling, creeping cold inside her. "I killed people today," she said, burying her face in his shirt. Even dressed as a Muggle, he somehow smelled the same. "I never killed anyone before. But I didn't even keep count of how many people I killed today." His arms closed around her back. "Tonks said—the Dark Magic I used today, I shouldn't be alone. But—there wasn't anyone to go to. Everyone else already has someone—someone they go to after—" "But you don't."

She nodded.

"What spell did you use?" Draco was asking. "What Dark Magic?"

"I carbonised a werewolf. It was mauling Ron. The day before the full moon, stunners would take so long." She was having her first hallucination in her life. She was possibly dying. Draco was as hot as a furnace and wearing a light grey hoodie that said Oxford on it and—jeans?

It was almost funny how ridiculous it was. She wanted to laugh as she took it in.

“No wonder you’re cold,” he muttered. She felt the pop of apparition, and, looking dazedly around, she found herself in a lavish Muggle hotel suite. She was bewildered. Of course, hallucinating as a rule made no sense. But this was just bizarre. She stared up at Draco. “Do you think this is what my subconscious thinks I want?” she asked. “To be with you in the Muggle world?“ His expression was unreadable. “What do you want?” Tears welled up in her eyes as she stared at him. “I don’t want to always be alone,” she choked out. “I want to love someone without feeling like if they know, it’ll end up hurting them. Harry was my first friend. I always wanted friends—but I was always too odd, too bookish, too awkward. I was always alone. No one wanted to be my real friend. Harry was the first person who let me be his friend. I thought we would always be friends. But now—I have to push him away to protect him. And Ron. And my—my parents. And now—there’s nobody. I have to love everyone from a distance. And I’m so lonely—” She sobbed into her hand.

“What happened to your parents?” Her mouth twisted. “I obliviated them after you killed Dumbledore. All their memories of me. Erased them all so I never existed. I sent them away. I thought, if the war was short, I’d be able to get them back. But you can’t reverse obliviation after five years.” The heat from Draco’s body felt like it was sinking all the way into her core. One of his hands was on her neck, and she leaned into it. “You don’t have to be alone, Granger,” he said. She wanted to believe him, but her mind couldn’t quiet itself to give in. It was never quiet. There were always realisations, guilt, and consequences she couldn’t ignore—that she couldn’t not know. Even delirious, there were things too dangerous to give herself.

She tried to push him away, but it was like trying to shove away a brick wall. “Why? Because of you?” she said bitterly. “I can’t—I don’t get to care about you. If I care about you, I won’t be able to use you. And you’re the only hope I have left of keeping everyone else alive. So I can’t.” “So use me,” he said. He started to kiss her, but she jerked back. “No. I can’t. I don’t—I don’t want to do that to you. You don’t deserve—I can take care of myself.” She tried to pull away, but he wouldn’t let go. “You don’t have to push me away to protect me,” he said in a hard, familiar voice. “I can take it. You can stop being lonely. I won’t misunderstand. I know you just want someone to be with. I won’t take it as meaning more than that.” She kept pulling away. “I’m alone too, Granger,” he said. She stilled, her hands compulsively gripping the fabric of his shirt. “I—,” she started. He swallowed her objections. His hands captured her face as his mouth pressed against hers. She clung to him and kissed him back.

Then he drew his mouth from hers and kissed her forehead. He pushed her back onto the bed. “Just rest,” he said as he seated himself on the edge of it. “I won’t go anywhere. Do what you need to stay grounded.”

He leaned back against the headboard and took her hand.

Hermione leaned against his chest and gripped his hand, pulling his arm against her chest and curling her head down. She rested her cheek against the back of his hand. She focused on breathing. On the heat against the cold. On the sensation of his fingers wrapped around hers. On his chin resting on top of her head.

She closed her eyes and focused on him. She could hear his heartbeat.

He was alive. He was alive. She had kept him alive.

She pressed her lips against his fingers and felt his grip tighten.

She lifted her head and stared at him. He looked back at her and didn't move when she let go of his hand in order to reach out and touch his face. She leaned closer and brushed her lips against his cheek. She pressed her lips against his forehead. Then, after a pause, she kissed him on the mouth.

He was fire to touch.

She didn't know if she'd ever get a chance to be with him again. If this was all she got.

She kissed him slowly. She wrapped her arm around his neck and pulled him closer, until his arms slid around her, and his lips began to move against hers.

She didn't know if what she was doing was holding on or letting go.

She slid her fingers into his hair.

His hands slipped behind her head, and he pulled the pins out of her braids. He helped her take off her cast. She studied the regrown bones and all the scars across her wrist. He ran his fingers through her hair until she shivered and looked back up at him.

Their kisses were slow. It wasn't seething or rushed or guilty. It was just desperate, because he somehow always made her desperate.

She kissed him the way she had wanted to. The way she had let herself secretly wish she could.

She could have that. Once.

He cradled her face in his hands. She gave a low sob against his lips.

"This—is the way I wanted it to be," she admitted to him. "With you. I wanted it to be like this with you." He went still, and she felt her tears sliding along his fingers. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry it wasn't," he said, pulling her closer, his thumbs grazing over her cheekbones.

Had he always been so warm? She wondered sometimes how much of her memory of kissing him the night after she'd healed him had been real. Or if she'd been so drunk she'd invented parts to replay in the moments when everything felt too void of any tenderness.

"It's fine," she said, pressing her head down on his shoulder.

"It's not. Let me give you this now."

He drew her lips back to his and kissed her. Slow and intent.

Like a star, he was glittering and ice-cold from afar, but when the space was bridged, the heat of him was endless.

He kissed her deeply while his hands slid along her body. His fingers traced her spine and over her shoulder blades, ghosting across her skin. He pulled her shirt off and kissed along her collarbones. His hands felt like home as he slid his fingers into her hair, drew her head back and pressed his lips against the base of her throat.

She tugged on his shirt until he pulled it off. Then she brought his mouth back to hers and kissed him again. Her fingers followed along the curve of his jaw, the tendons of his neck, and over his shoulders. He was thinner, and he had so many new scars he felt almost unfamiliar. He kissed along every inch of her. He pulled her bra off and slid his palms over her breasts. He kissed down her

sternum until her head dropped back and she was gasping. The heat of his touch felt like it had kindled itself inside of her. She found herself catching fire until she ached.

He watched her unwaveringly, as though committing every reaction to memory so that he'd always know it.

It wasn't too fast or too much for her to be ready for. He went as slow as she wanted him to.

When he pushed slowly inside her, his eyes were fastened on her face. "Is this good for you?"

She gave a faint gasp and nodded. Because it was. No pain. It was just good.

"This is good," she said, gripping him by the shoulders. She could feel the scars from his runes under her fingers.

His forearms were around her head as though framing her, and his fingers were twisted in her hair. When he started to move, he pressed his forehead against hers.

When he kissed her, it felt like the beginning of something that could be eternal. At first, it was so gradual she almost forgot that there was more to it. It could have stayed like that, and it would have been enough. The weight, and warmth, and sensation of his skin against hers. She breathed in against his shoulder; he smelled like oakmoss with the undertones of cedar and papyrus sedge. Underlying it was the scent and taste of his sweat.

Her association with beds was as a place of last resort; where everything was cold and empty, and she hoped that whatever nightmare came wouldn't be so awful she'd regret lying down at all.

There wasn't any cold here. The whole world had ceased to exist beyond Draco and his body against and inside her. He knew how to slide his hands across her skin so that she was gasping, kiss her so she wrapped her legs tightly around his waist, and move inside her so slowly that at first she didn't even notice the coiling tension inside of her.

But of course there was more, and Draco was looking for it. All his meticulous attention to when her breath caught, and what angle made her move in response. Watching her eyes, entwining his fingers with hers and noting when her hold tightened.

He kissed her and he kissed her. Slowly, the pace, and the friction, and the contact increased and grew into something more than comforting.

But when he slid his hand between her legs, she flinched. She wasn't sure if she could do that part.

It was too—

The last time when he had put his hand there—

*"You're no threat to my job now, are you?"*

She gave a stifled sob and turned her head away. He stilled, withdrew his hand and cradled her face, kissing her.

"You get this part. This is yours," he said.

"I just—I don't know how to do any of this. The way the books explain it isn't the same," she said, drawing her chin down and speaking quickly. "And last time, when you touched me there—no one

ever had before and when you did you said—" her voice broke off. "I always —think about it now. That I'm—that I'm—that I'm—"

"I'm sorry," he said, and his hand entwined with hers tightened. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I've ruined so much of this for you. Let me give you this. Let me show you what it's supposed to be like."

She hesitated for a moment before she gave a cautious nod.

He dipped his head so that his mouth was near her ear. "Close your eyes." His breath whispered against her skin.

Her eyes fluttered closed, and he kissed her. Without being able to see, everything felt more focused on the sensation. The way his body was pressed against hers. The scent of him. Even the movement of the air.

When she felt his lips brush against the pulse-point of her throat, she moaned. His hand cupped her breast, and he dragged his thumb over her nipple as he started to move inside her again. He was slow but unrelenting, until she was gasping and arching her hips to meet his.

He kissed her as he slid his hand between their bodies again. His tongue slid against hers as he deepened the kiss, and his fingers found the sensitive cluster of nerves between her legs. She gasped raggedly against his lips as she felt her whole body tense under and around him.

It was as though she were being wound tight somewhere inside. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest. Her breath kept growing shorter and shorter, and her muscles grew more taut. There was fire inside of her nerves. Everytime Draco moved inside her, or brushed his lips across her skin, or lightly teased her centre, she felt as though he were ratcheting up a tension inside her, notch by notch, until she was on the verge of breaking under him.

But she couldn't—

If she broke, there would never be anyone to pick up the pieces.

She stayed suspended on the very edge. "I can't—" she finally gasped out.

"Hermione," Draco's lips brushed against her cheek. "You get to have this. You're allowed to feel good things. Don't be alone. Have this—have this with me."

He pulled her leg up with his arm; it deepened and shifted the angle, drawing the tension inside her further up, and he crushed their bodies together and kissed her.

Her eyes suddenly shot open. She stared into his eyes as her whole world suddenly shattered into shards of silver.

"Oh god—," she sobbed the words out. Her fingernails sank into his back. "Oh—oh—oh god…"

His unfathomable grey eyes stared down at her and watched as she arched and her expression contorted as she came apart under him.

As she started panting and trying to catch her breath, his speed increased. Then, as he came, his mask slipped. As he met her eyes, for a moment before he buried his face in her shoulder, she saw the heartbreak in him when he looked at her. He shifted off her and pulled the coverlet up over them. He kissed her temple. She turned to look at him and shifted closer until she was pressed against his

chest.

She could feel how drained she was, sense the edge of cold that had been planted in her magic where she'd torn it open. She shivered and burrowed closer to Draco. She glanced up at him. He was staring down at her, expressionless. She reached up and ran a finger along his cheekbone. "I think I've nearly memorised you. Especially your eyes."

The corner of his mouth twitched, and he traced his fingers over the scars on her left wrist. "I memorised yours too." He sighed. "I should have known—the moment I looked into your eyes, I should have known I would never win against you."

She gave a faint smile and closed her eyes. She pressed her face against his chest and felt his heartbeat. "I always thought my eyes were my best feature."

"One of them," he said quietly.

She fell asleep, still drawing in the fire from him.

*Flashback 29*

**March 2003**

When she woke in the morning, she found that she really was in a hotel with Draco. It was so surprising she thought perhaps she was still hallucinating.

She glanced about the room, trying to wrap her mind around it. She wasn't dreaming; she was really, actually in a Muggle hotel suite with Draco. A suite that he apparently occupied while wearing an Oxford hoodie.

If she were still composing a psychological sketch of him, the revelation would have required her to start a whole new notebook. Why was he there? Was it something he did often? Why on earth would he be spending the night in the Muggle world?

She turned her head to look at him.

He was asleep, wrapped possessively around her as though he were keeping her from being stolen. His body was so warm against hers it was almost searing. As she studied him in bewilderment, the full events of the night came back to her. She flinched.

She shouldn't have come. She shouldn't have come, and she shouldn't have stayed. It had been a mistake. He was like a dragon. The jealous way he hoarded the things he cared about—there was no moderation in it. He was possessive and deadly. He held her in his arms like she was his. The temptation to give into it, to let him have her and to love him for it—it terrified her. Her need to love people and the desperate desire for them to love her back—she had locked it away. Acceded its place to the coldness of logic, realism, and strategic decisions for the sake of the war. She'd shoved it down into a hole where she wouldn't feel it. Wouldn't miss it. But Draco had dragged it up from the well where she'd hidden it, uncovered it, and set himself to picking the lock. She could almost feel his fingers turning the dial, listening to the drop of every tumbler. Lying in wait for a way in. His own grief and loneliness, his attention and unwavering constance, and that way he looked at her, the way he touched her; it was slipping through her defenses and coiling around her heart as surely as she had wound around his. She tried to slide out of the bed before he woke, but his eyes snapped open the instant she shifted. His hold on her tightened, and he pulled her back toward himself for a moment before his expression flickered, and he let her go. She stilled and looked up at him. The sense of terror he had inspired in her a year ago had faded entirely. The danger of him— it was still there, cast in even sharper relief now that she had seen how ruthlessly he could kill. But despite realising just how merciless he could be, it made her feel less frightened of him. Now she knew how much he was holding back. Despite the heights to which he had vaulted himself within Voldemort's army, he was holding himself back. Wiping out an entire squadron of Death Eaters had barely required effort. He had arrived and killed nearly a hundred people in a matter of minutes.

She studied his face, and he stared back at her. His expression was shuttered. Whatever he might be feeling was carefully concealed. But his eyes—

The way he looked at her was enough to stop her heart. “I shouldn’t have come,” she finally said. He didn’t look hurt or surprised by the words. “You needed someone. I just happened to be available. You don’t need to worry, it’s not going to complicate things for you,” he said, looking away from her, his fingers playing lightly along her wrist. “I didn’t expect it to change anything.”

Hermione's breath caught and she swallowed nervously.

She couldn’t tell him that that wasn’t what she meant. He wasn’t just someone. He was—to her he was—

That was the mistake of it.

It must have showed on her face because as he studied her, his eyes suddenly flashed with something that looked like triumph. Before she could draw away or bolt, he pulled her back to him, and his lips descended upon hers. The moment his mouth was against hers, all her fears and guilt and resolution became lost to her. All she could think of was how she wanted to be there, being touched by him. He was like fire. He wasn’t lying in wait, he’d already burned his way in. He had seen the cracks in her defenses, and in the same relentless manner he had driven through her occlumency walls, he was breaking his way into her heart. He dragged her beneath himself. Searing her with his lips as his hands roamed over her body. She clung to him and kissed him back fiercely. This wasn’t like the previous night.

It wasn’t comfort. It was claiming. His mouth was hot against her lips, along her jaw and her throat and over her shoulders. She tangled her fingers in his hair and held him as she tried not to cry from how desperately she wanted him and how grateful she was that he wasn’t going to force her to ask. His possessive hands trailed over her body, pulling her closer and closer until she was crushed against him. Then he aligned himself and sank inside her with a sharp thrust. As he moved inside her, he memorised her body under his hands and kissed her until she was gasping for breath. He drove deep inside her. His hold on her—his touch—she would never forget it. He was exacting. Determined to prove what they were to her. Ensure she couldn’t deny what he made her feel. He made her come apart under his hands, under his body, twice before he let go. When he surged into her, his control slipped away leaving his expression open for a moment. There wasn’t heartbreak on his face now, it was possession— —and triumph. “You’re mine. You swore yourself to me,” he said in her ear, as he slipped out of her and dragged her tightly against himself. “Now. And after the war. You promised it. I’m going to take care of you. I’m not going to let anyone hurt you. You don’t have to be lonely. Because you’re mine.” She should go.

But she had lost herself there. She was locked in the dangerous embrace of Draco Malfoy, and it felt like home.

She slept in his arms, nearly dead to the world. She couldn’t remember the last time she had slept for more than four hours without Dreamless Sleep potion. She roused briefly to the sensation of his hand sliding along her shoulder. She looked up and found him studying her. She arched into his touch and pressed a kiss over his heart before falling asleep again.

When she woke next, it was nearly evening. Draco was sitting next to her, playing with her fingers.

“How are you here?” she asked, staring up at him bewildered.

He quirked an eyebrow. “This is my suite.”

She rolled her eyes. “How are you in the Muggle world? And how are you able to spend a whole day in bed with me? Aren’t you a General?”

He tangled a hand in her hair and pulled her mouth against his, rolling on top of her and kissing her for several minutes before drawing his head back and staring at her. “I’m usually in the Muggle world when I’m not working. Unless I’m polyjuiced, there’s no—what I am, and what I’ve done—” he looked away, “—everyone knows who I am. So—when I’m not on duty, I come into the Muggle world. No one knows me. If anything requires my presence, the Dark Lord can summon me himself or send someone to the Manor. I know if anyone tries to enter the gates.”

“You don’t live at your manor?” she asked. His hand slid possessively down her throat, and she felt his thumb ghost across her collarbone.

“I don’t. Not unless I’m required to host something. I—,” he withdrew his hand and sat up abruptly. “—it—it—” his head dropped for a second, and he drew a sharp breath. “Everything is tainted there. Every time I’m there, I hear my mother—screaming. It’s like the house is haunted. The cage she was kept in; it was built into the floor of the drawing room using magic from the estate’s ley lines. I can’t remove it.”

The bitterness in his tone reminded Hermione of how private his grief was. How carefully he’d carried it. All alone. Year after year.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, resting her hand on his cheek and catching strands of his hair with her fingertips. He dropped his head against her palm and closed his eyes for a moment.

“Anyway,”—his voice was tense and uncomfortable—“it would raise questions if I were seen living elsewhere. Somehow I ended up in the Muggle world.” He gave a faint incredulous laugh. “I wandered around trying to figure out how it all works here. The concierge is useful; no matter how idiotic the questions I ask or bizarre the request, they find a way to accommodate it. And they never ask questions, no matter how much I bleed on their towels.”

“What hotel is this?” she asked, sitting up and glancing around the room.

“Ah. What day of the month is it?” he said musingly. “Last week of March—this is the Savoy.”

Hermione drew back slightly to stare at him. “You have multiple hotels you stay at?” “Too much magical activity could eventually draw attention, even with all the wards. So I cycle between a few of them with an arithmantical randomisation equation. The staff are mildly Confunded; not anything detectable, just enough that if they were asked for my physical description, they’d all offer something different.” He shrugged.

Hermione blinked and tried not to think about how much money Draco was spending by keeping multiple hotel suites constantly at his disposal. Rich wanker.

“So you live in posh Muggle hotel suites when you’re not being a General in the Wizarding War,” she said, shaking her head with disbelief.

“You knew I’ve studied Muggle history; where did you think I did it? I’m fairly good at blending in.” His tone dripped with aristocratic smugness as he said it, and Hermione doubted there was anywhere in the world that he could be described as blending in.

He looked away from her again, twisting his left arm to hide the Dark Mark. “It seemed sensible to

do things temporarily, and it was something to do when I had time off." Hermione was silent. Of course, he'd spent almost a year waiting for the day when she would sell him out. Temporary. Uncommitted. It was sensible.

She rested her head against his shoulder and wrapped her arms around him. She could feel the scars of his runes under her fingers.

"When—when did you realise that I didn't know you were supposed to die in June?"

He gave a faint laugh. "When you said it. I thought when I pointed out that you should have anticipated my punishment that you'd realise Moody and Shacklebolt set me up. But you didn't. Then I assumed by the next day it would have been explained to you. But it apparently hadn't. So I concluded that Moody and Shacklebolt had decided that my survival was useful in the meanwhile. It was clear, based on how you behaved, they wouldn't inform you of that detail until they decided to make the move. Which made you both amusing and agonising to be around. Sometimes I wanted to just tell you, but—I suppose I enjoyed the way you wanted to save me."

Hermione pressed her lips together and rested her forehead against him. "I did wonder sometimes, at the beginning, if that was the plan. But I assumed it was years away. I tried not to think about it. And eventually I forgot. After I healed your runes and you stopped coming —I stopped thinking about it then. I was so preoccupied with wondering if I were ever going to see you again."

Draco was silent.

"When I came Thursday after Christmas—I had just found out. That it had been the plan."

Draco gave a faint nod. "I thought as much."

He turned his head slowly and looked down at her. "Since we're talking, I've been meaning to ask, what did you do to me?" Hermione froze guiltily.

The corner of his mouth twitched as he continued to study her.

"Granger, I had those runes for a month before you got your wand into them. I went to several healers for pain relief. Aside from the general obscurity of treating runic magic at all, whatever you did violated fundamental laws of Magic. So—I have my guesses, but I would appreciate it if you told me."

Hermione was quiet for a minute, tracing her fingers along the scars, her other hand still entwined with his.

"In Egypt, Isis is the goddess of Healing," she finally said in a low voice. "Some say she has power over Fate itself. In Egyptian mythology when a person dies, the heart is weighed and only those deemed virtuous are permitted into the afterlife. It's said that Isis gifted the Egyptian Healers with a pouch of stones capable of purifying the heart. The stones are called the Heart of Isis. According to the myths, someone whose heart was corrupted by darkness could be granted a chance at redemption if their actions had been borne from good intent." She swallowed. "What the stones do is absorb Dark Magic; they purify the poison of it."

"You have one."

Hermione studied the sheets on bed. "The Director of the hospital entrusted me with one. It was

intended for Harry. He thought if Harry defeated You Know Who, he would need it. That Harry would deserve to be purified to have a chance at the life he wants afterward. But Harry would never—will never use Dark Magic. For him, the opposition to using it is based in a form of principle. It's not because he's afraid to die or be hurt by it. He won't use it because he doesn't want anyone else to use it. The runes—they were poisoning you. You knew they were poisoning you. I was so late I couldn't even slow it. You saved hundreds of people, and we needed you. So I used the stone to heal you. That's—when the Order found out what I had done—that's—that's why I was deemed compromised."

She abruptly drew away, pulling her knees up to her chest and drawing the coverlet tightly around herself.

Compromised. Unreliable.

Sitting naked in Draco Malfoy's bed.

If Moody and Kingsley knew she was there of her own volition—that she'd gone to him— would it make any difference? Or had they always operated under the assumption she'd end up there?

She stared down at all the scars on her wrist. They were still fresh and pink coloured; if she treated them they'd fade more.

Draco broke the silence after a minute. "So—how does a Heart of Isis work exactly?" Hermione looked up at him. He was expressionless as he studied her. Her eyes dropped down to her hands again.

"It's not well understood. In some respects they're alchemically similar to a Philosopher's Stone. But—the Egyptian hospital doesn't publicise the fact that the stones are even real. They don't permit research. There isn't much verified information."

"How does it work?"

"It—well"—she shifted awkwardly—"for minor amounts of Dark Magic just temporary proximity is sufficient. But," she looked down, "the runes are permanent. Each of them is like a Dark curse, pulling constantly on your magic. You—you chose so many—in order to heal you, I—it's—it's inside your heart. I put it there when you were unconscious." Hermione glanced up nervously at his reaction.

Draco's eyebrows arched sharply upwards. "You put a stone inside my heart—when I was unconscious?"

"A magical stone," Hermione said, jutting her chin up, "to save you from being poisoned to death."

"You put a stone inside my heart without asking permission." He stared at her, his silver eyes wide with astonishment. "Is it even removable?"

Hermione flushed. "Not—really. I couldn't tell you, I still didn't know if you were planning to become the next Dark Lord at that point. I couldn't very well ask whether you wanted to be made immune to Dark Magic."

He snorted and sank back against the pillows. "I'm not immune to it. I would have noticed if the cruciatus had stopped working." "Not immune to getting cursed. You're immune to the effects of

using it. The runes still affect you the way they were intended to. They just can't poison you. You're immune to the corrosion and tainting. It's like—an ongoing purification ritual set inside your magic."

Draco was silent.

She studied him and hesitantly reached out, touching his chest over his heart. "Can you tell? I don't know what it's like—for you. Nothing shows in diagnostic spells. But you noticed, didn't you? That things were different."

He gave a slow nod, his expression closed. "It's like—getting sliced open and not bleeding. You know better than I do what happens when Dark Magic is channeled. It makes it simultaneously easier and harder to use the Dark Arts. There's none of the wrenching sensation that I'm pulling up something more powerful. Even the slicing sensation is growing dulled. I suspect—eventually—I won't feel it at all." He looked away from her.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, pulling her hand back and looking away. She pressed her fingers against her sternum. She felt as though there were a cold weight inside her chest, like the sensation of touching a corpse. There was a fresh and visceral sense of contamination inside her. But it felt—appropriate. There were certain things that were supposed to hurt. That needed to cost something.

When you tore your soul apart, you were supposed to feel it.

She looked at Draco; he was staring out the window, his expression closed. The silence was heavy. She kept waiting for him to look back. He didn't.

Hermione swallowed and glanced away. Her skin felt cold, and she wondered if it was a sign she should go.

"I am sorry that I didn't ask," she finally said, shifting toward the edge of the bed. Her clothes were—somewhere.

She felt a hand close around her wrist.

"Good god, Granger, your friends have fucked you over. I'm not angry with you." He pulled her back across the bed. His expression was hard as he dragged her back toward himself. "And if I were, I would get over it. But—you didn't tell me what you'd done. I thought I was dying. Then I thought I was going mad. It didn't occur to me until December that you'd permanently healed me. It wasn't something I anticipated. I'm still coming to terms with it. Do you really walk through life expecting everyone you save to punish you for it?"

Hermione flinched. "It's easier to anticipate it than to be caught by surprise."

"Do not presume it with me." His expression was hard as marble.

Hermione gave a tight defensive laugh and pulled away from him with a sharp jerk. "Why not? You do it better than anyone."

Her mouth twisted as she stared at him. "After all, the first time I healed you, you came back the next week and hexed me again and again until I looked as though I'd been whipped. When I didn't want to curse you when you were injured, you threw Colin Creevey's death in my face. After you

kissed me while you were drunk, you left and I didn't see you for nearly two months. After I healed you in December, you grabbed me by the throat and stared in my eyes as you reminded me that you'd made me a whore—just because you could. Then—," her voice cracked, and her head dropped as she turned away from him, "—after I went and told the Order you'd agreed to take an Unbreakable Vow and begged them not to kill you, you told me you couldn't stand to look at me because being sworn to me was worse than being a Death Eater. That was four days ago. Why shouldn't I assume you won't eventually decide to punish me for this too? You always do."

She sat on the edge of the bed with her back to him and gave a low sob. "I'm not blind to the failures of my friends. But you have no room to claim your treatment of me has been superior in some way. You—you're all the same."

Draco was silent. "I'm sorry," he finally said.

Hermione gave a low, mirthless laugh. "Yes, they all apologise at some point too. Harry— Harry was very apologetic yesterday after I went back to the safe house. Until he remembered that I used Dark Magic; then he was angry that I hadn't saved Ron some other way. I'm sure he'll apologise again next week."

Draco drew a sharp breath. "I am sorry."

Hermione just stared at the floor without responding.

"I never expected you—anyone like you," Draco said after a minute. "I knew what you were doing, but you'd look me in the eye and do it anyway. When I'd feel it work, I'd do whatever I could to make you stop. From the moment you walked into my safe house, I expected you'd eventually be the one to sell me out; I expected you to know that. But instead you acted as though I were redeemable. You acted as if you were going to be owned by me for the rest of your life, and you were just determined to live with it if it saved your Order. I didn't realise they wouldn't tell you."

Hermione bit her lip. "I think they must not have thought I'd play my part well enough—if I knew."

She swallowed, her mouth twisting as she tried to tamp down on the overwhelming sense of hurt and betrayal she felt toward everyone she had done the most to protect.

"I thought there would be a point when I was cruel enough, and you'd stop. I assumed you'd have a limit. I figured that once I found it, you'd—you'd stop emotionally blindsiding me." He gave a low sigh. "I spent a long time assuming you'd be the one who'd get me killed in the end. I didn't want the additional pain of caring that you had. I was trying to hurt you. But I am sorry."

Hermione stared out the window at the Thames below.

"We're a fucked up pair," she said, the corner of her mouth lifting. "I can't believe it ended up like this. I did want to kill you the first time I saw you. I assumed you'd rape me or at least force me to have sex with you and amuse yourself by hurting me, and then someday, I'd get to kill you. I was looking forward to it. But I always felt that you were only showing me a mask; someone you thought would be easy for me to hate. Maybe if I'd been less lonely, I would have believed it, but you reminded me of myself. I thought at first we were the reverse of each other. Now—," she looked over at him and extended her hand, "—I think we're mostly the same."

His eyes were dark as he interlaced his fingers with hers and pulled her slowly back toward himself;

until she was in his arms, their bodies pressed against each other. He kissed her. He kissed her, and she kissed him.

Life was not cold. He drew his head back and kissed her forehead, sliding his hands along her shoulders and caressing her throat in a way that had grown familiar. He kissed between her eyes. “You’re a better person than I am.”

She lifted her hand up to catch his jaw in her palm. She felt as though she couldn’t possibly touch him enough.

“I never had to go as far. Like you said, I still had space to be naive. Even though I knew some of what was happening, it didn’t occur to me how far the Order would go. I knew Kingsley was manipulative, that he uses people’s impulses to get the results he needs. But— I’m not a strategist; I don’t know how to think of people that way in the long term. Even when I try to,”—she rested her head on his shoulder—“I don’t know how to stay detached about it.”

He turned her face up toward his. “You keep people alive. You look at them, and you try to keep all of them alive. That is considerably more difficult than calculating all the ways you can use them or kill them. I imagine it costs you more too.”

The corner of her mouth quirked sadly, and she looked down. Draco rested his forehead against hers, and she closed her eyes. It felt as though their souls were touching.

She turned her head until his nose brushed against hers, and she tilted her chin up so that their lips met.

She wanted to spend the rest of her life lost in that moment.

She drew back reluctantly. “I have to go. I’m sure the Order is waiting for an explanation.”

Draco didn’t let go. “You should eat.”

“I have to go,” Hermione said, shaking her head.

His fingers twitched as his hold tightened. “Take a shower. I’ll order you something. Any preferences?”

“Draco,” she took hold of his wrist and firmly pulled his hand off of her. “You can’t keep me here. I have to go.”

His expression flickered briefly. Just enough to reveal a shard of possessiveness and something ravenous and desperate that she couldn’t quite place. Then it all vanished as he withdrew his hands and let her stand.

His expression was cold and closed, but his eyes burned.

Hermione reached out and touched his face, tilting his head back. She pressed a kiss on his forehead.

“I’ll take you up on that shower.” She pulled the flat sheet off the bed and wrapped it around herself as she gathered her clothes off the floor. She could feel Draco’s gaze as she crossed the room. The bathroom had an enormous claw foot tub that Hermione gazed longingly at before stepping into the shower. The unmistakable scent of sex hung around her, and she still had traces of blood on her from the previous day. Not all of it was hers. She could feel it in her hair as she started to wash it.

She scrubbed herself rapidly from head to toe before stepping out and drying off. She glanced in the mirror. The bathroom was brightly, almost starkly lit. Designed for women who applied make-up meticulously and wanted to be able to inspect their every pore. Hermione stared at herself in the mirror, clutching the towel against herself.

Grimmauld Place's poor lighting was much kinder to her. She barely recognised the person in the reflection.

As she was staring, Draco came and stood at the door. He'd pulled a pair of trousers on.

"You're right, I do look like a corpse," she said after another moment.

The hollows of his cheeks flushed, and his eyes dropped to the floor. "You should eat more."

She shrugged. "It's stress. It's not like they don't feed me. I'll eat again when I can sleep again." She looked over at him with a critical eye. "You're not exactly sporting a healthy body weight yourself."

He looked down at himself and then back up at her, arching an eyebrow. "Who do you think causes my stress? You are a nightmare to worry about."

She glanced away, her throat tightening slightly as she started to scourgify her clothes. "I— do actually have a foraging partner now."

"The Patil who lost her foot. The one you trained."

Hermione looked up and stared at him in the mirror. "How did you know?"

He met her eyes coolly. "I pay attention to any reports regarding the Order's healers. You are remarkably invisible, but Patil is a familiar face in the Resistance. Friendly. And *quite* talkative. Small details here and there. They add up." He was expressionless. "I'm a legilimens. I'm often the one who pulls that information out."

Hermione's throat tightened. "Why did you train me then? If you knew?"

He gave a thin smile and tilted his head to the side. "When did that start, mid-October? You still went alone too, to maintain your cover. I wanted you to live. After I died, I wanted you to still be alive. I could have just demanded you have a partner. It wouldn't have been unreasonable, given my terms. But Shacklebolt or Moody won't meet my terms once I'm gone." His expression grew vicious. "As you said yourself: if they sold you once, what would stop them from doing it again? Who knows, maybe the second time around they'd have advertised it."

There was a tearing sensation in Hermione's stomach, and she looked away. "They're not— they're not monsters. They have so few options. They have to work with what they have. They're the ones keeping the Resistance alive. It's their calculated choices that have carried us this far. They can't prioritise me over everyone else. I don't want them to."

"I don't care about the Resistance," he said sneering.

"Well, I do." Hermione didn't waver. She met his eyes as she said it. "I care about all of them. I will always care about them."

"They don't even know who you are." His tone was venomous. "You're a faceless figure in their

pain. They love their nurses, the hospice healers, Pomfrey, Patil. The ones who hover once they're out of danger. They don't even know that you're the one who's saved them again and again. Or anything else you've done."

Hermione shrugged and pulled her clothes on. She was not accustomed to being naked, not around anyone. Once her shirt and trousers were on, she began braiding her hair with practiced ease.

Draco remained standing in the doorway. She could almost feel the resentment radiating from him as he watched her prepare to leave.

"I didn't do anything I've done because I expected to be seen as heroic." She scoffed. "I don't require laurels. When this war is over—," she looked away as she caught new sections of hair and laced them into her braids, "—if the Order wins…" She swallowed. "If we win, there's a good chance that Kingsley, Moody and I could all eventually be convicted of war crimes."

She met Draco's eyes in the reflection of the mirror. "I will never be a hero. I knew that when I chose to train as a healer. That's never been the reason for any of my choices."

She finished one braid and started on the other.

"Potter is worth that much to you?"

The corner of her mouth quirked. "It's more than that. Harry is my best friend, but the war is bigger than Harry or anyone else."

Her hands stilled, and she stood silent for a moment.

"I want—," she started and then paused and drew a short breath. "I want the next Muggle-born witch with stars in her eyes to come into a world that welcomes her. A world where she doesn't have to constantly re-earn her right to be there and isn't treated like wanting to exist is stealing something from someone else. Where she'll get to grow up and graduate. Get any job she wants, get married and have children, and grow old with someone. I didn't—," her voice broke off briefly. "I—won't get to have any of those things. I want to make the world I wanted to live in."

*Flashback 30*

**March 2003**

Hermione apparated to Grimmauld Place. Her protean charm bracelet had not burned for the entire day; she assumed it meant that she was not urgently required anywhere.

“Hail the conquering hero!” Angelina shouted as Hermione hurried past the sitting room. Hermione paused awkwardly while Angelina jumped up from her seat, and Angelina, Katie, Parvati, Susan, Neville, Dean and Seamus all crowded around, patting Hermione admiringly on the shoulders.

”I can't believe you went on a mission again.”

“I nearly slapped Fred when I found out he went without me.”

“Fuckin’ unbelievable the lot of you got Ron back.”

“Moody and Kingsley are pissed,” Neville said, giving her a serious look. “Kingsley spent ten minutes yelling at Remus when he came to report about the mission.”

Hermione nodded, cringing inwardly. “I need to go report. Where is he?”

“War room.”

Hermione nodded. “Alright. Thanks everyone. It was—,” she grasped for something positive sounding to say, “—quite a thrill being in the field again. I’m just glad we got Ron back.”

Kingsley was standing over a table covered with scrolls. Hermione stopped at the door and waited for him to look up.

“You’re back then?”

“I’m back. I needed some recovery time.”

“Will I finally get a version of events that doesn’t involve a deathtrap in which everyone but the intended victims somehow died?” Kingsley looked up, and Hermione could see the rage in his expression. He whipped his wand out and cast a privacy charm over the room.

Hermione stepped in and pushed the door shut behind her, leaning back against the frame. “I couldn’t send word. I didn’t know the location or anything else concrete. Harry didn’t tell me why he was taking me from Grimmauld Place until we were at the Tonks house. I think he suspected I might warn you. I was only given fifteen minutes to get my healing kit. You were gone. Moody was gone. There wasn’t anyone to warn who wouldn’t have just wanted to come too.”

“You went to Malfoy.” Kingsley walked around the table as he stared at her.

“The information Harry had came from Snatchers. I tried to warn him it was a trap, but he was going to go. I considered revealing Malfoy, but I didn’t think it would stop them. I thought if I could

contact Dra-Malfoy, he might be able to offer new information I could take back to Harry and Remus. I thought if there were conflicting reports, it might buy time. But Malfoy didn't come while I was there. I left him a note with all the information I had." "It was a trap."

Hermione gave a short nod. "Apparently they didn't even expect us to fall for it."

"And then?"

"We were outnumbered. I don't think many of the Death Eaters there were experienced in combat. Draco said it was mostly trainees. But there was a werewolf, and the numbers were absurd."

Hermione looked down and gave a low sigh before looking back up. "Rabastan Lestrange is dead. The trap was his idea. Malfoy showed up a few minutes after Ron was mauled."

Kingsley's expression showed no surprise. "How did he kill everyone?"

"He killed at least a third of them dueling. Then he—he had some kind of vacuum curse contained in an artifact. He came across the field and activated it once he had hold of me. The curse didn't affect the wielder, and the protection was extended to me through contact. He suffocated everyone, revived and obliviated Harry and the others, and then left them outside the wards. He didn't let me stay to check any of them."

"What happened to you?" Kingsley was studying her carefully; his eyes landed on her scarred wrist.

Hermione pulled her sleeve down. "Nothing that couldn't be healed. I used the Carbonescere curse to kill the werewolf. When I was dealing with the initial backlash in my magic, someone stabbed me." She looked away and pressed her lips together for a moment. "Harry hadn't expected it to be a trap, so I wasn't given a partner. I think he thought Ron would be with me, but—well, Ron is Harry's partner. As soon as the Death Eaters appeared, everyone got into their default pairings, so I was fighting solo." Hurt cut into her tone as she said it, and she looked down at her feet. "Which was probably for the best. Draco never trained me to fight with a partner anyway."

There was still blood on her shoes. She drew a deep breath. "Draco—Malfoy said to tell Moody that his aid is conditional on my survival."

"I am already aware of that." Kingsley's voice was hard. "You will not ever go on another mission; I don't care if someone asks you to go save Harry himself. You will not forage. You will not leave the safe houses unless it's to liaise. Your job, Granger, is to stay alive and keep Malfoy in line."

Hermione drew a short breath and felt rebellious rage burn across her chest. She glared at him for several seconds before she forced her occlumency walls into place and swallowed all she wanted to spit at him.

She rolled her jaw and looked away. "Tonks is asking questions about my disappearance and training. I told her to speak to Moody."

"I'll take care of it." Kingsley straightened his robes.

Hermione gave a small, resigned nod and gripped the door frame, feeling the grain of the wood under her fingers. "Ron was badly mauled. He needs to be isolated tonight."

"We're dealing with a larger situation. He was tagged. There's a trace on his right wrist that we

can’t remove.”

Hermione’s skin prickled, and there was a dropping sensation in her stomach. “The shackle? It’s the shackle on him, isn’t it? I tried to remove it when I was healing him. Is that—do you think that’s what Sussex has been developing?”

“It seems likely. It explains why they had him there rather than luring Harry to an empty building. It’s fortunate we knew there was a chance of it, and Remus at least had the sense not to bring Ron to Grimmauld Place. Alastor is monitoring the situation. It seems the Death Eaters know the approximate location of the Tonks house because of it. Until we can get the trace off, we’ll be compromising our safe houses. If they’re somehow using dark beings to break through Fidelius, we’re on borrowed time.”

Hermione swallowed hard. “Have you contacted Severus? Who’s run analysis on the shackle? I didn’t—yesterday. I should have. It was careless of me. I can go back.”

Kingsley shook his head sharply. “You will not go near that house again. Severus is on shift in the labs. He’ll be here in an hour for an Order meeting.”

“Alright. Do you need anything else?”

Kingsley looked back down at the table. “No. You can give a full report to Alastor later.”

Hermione turned to leave. She was halfway through the door when Kingsley spoke.

“Granger.”

She turned and found Kingsley staring at her.

“You’re alright?”

She shrugged. “I’m alright.” “I’m glad to hear it. I would never have forgiven Harry if he’d gotten you killed to save Ron.”

Hermione gave a bitter smile, and her hold on the doorknob tightened. “Draco is vital, I know. I’ll be more careful.”

Kingsley’s expression flickered. “That’s not what I mean. When Remus reported that they thought you’d been captured—” Kingsley drew a deep breath and looked away from her. “I would have mourned your loss; more than I would have mourned anyone else in the Order.”

Hermione tilted her head to the side and didn’t believe him. The corner of her mouth quirked slightly, and she raised an eyebrow. “Would you now?” She snorted, shaking her head. “Is that why you call me Granger then? Because I’m *so* important to you?”

Kingsley gave her a sad smile. “I call you Granger to remind myself that I am responsible for more people than simply the ones that I like.” He sighed and stared down at the table for a moment before looking back up at her. “It would have been a privilege to have been friends with you in another life, Hermione Granger.”

Hermione studied him for several seconds. “Maybe—in another life we could have been friends. But—I don’t think I’ll ever forgive you in this one.”

Kingsley nodded slowly and looked away from her. “In case the opportunity never comes to say it later, I am sorry—for everything I’ve asked of you.” Hermione was silent for several seconds before she gave a low sigh. “If you hadn’t asked, I would have offered.” She shrugged. “You never forced me. I am culpable for my choices.”

She stepped through the door and headed down the hall.

Severus brought a report on the shackle a few hours later. It was a new prototype. It required a Dark Mark to remove. There were more complex designs being developed.

There was a long silence at the revelation.

“Well, that’s not—it could be worse,” Charlie said after a minute. “Snape can get it off then. Or one of our prisoners. A few of them are marked, right?”

“I can remove Ron Weasley’s, but when I do, Sussex will know, and the next shackle they release may require a more elaborate mechanism.” Severus sneered contemptuously at Charlie.

“Got a better idea?” Charlie jutted his chin up and glared at Severus.

“We’ll remove the trace on Ron.” Kingsley said, resting his fingers on the edge and tapping thoughtfully. “However, until we have better information on the shackles, there will be no further rescues. We can’t afford to lose more safe houses.”

“Well, shouldn’t Snape know? Since he works there? I thought that was the whole reason we kept him.” “I do not run the entire lab.” Severus’ tone was vicious. “I operate within the potion and curse divisions. I’m not the one running experiments on dark creatures or developing traced shackles. There are limitations to how much information I can provide without warning.” His dark eyes rested briefly on Hermione. “I may have better intelligence next week.”

“We’ll take a team to the Tonks cottage and get the shackle off Ron.” Kingsley rolled up the scroll of information Severus had brought and handed it to Hermione and Fleur to look over. “According to Alastor, the Death Eaters only have a vague idea of where the cottage is at this point. We’ll take a group of twenty and split into smaller teams. Fred and Charlie will escort Severus and I through the Fidelius to remove the trace. Everyone else will act as decoys. We’ll likely have to fight our way out. We’ll go polyjuiced. That will cause confusion over who to target. I’ll send word to Potter and Moody to expect us. Granger, get the Polyjuice doses ready.”

“I’ll need identities and a time limit,” Hermione said as she stood up.

“Two hour dose.” Kingsley paused in thought for a moment before adding “Use Harry’s hair. They’ll expect him there. They won’t expect there to be twenty-four of him. The confusion will buy us time. We’ll have to isolate both Remus and Ron once they get back to Grimmauld Place. Fleur, get two rooms warded in the basement.”

Hermione gave a short nod and headed to her potion cabinet, leaving the rest of the Order to strategise and debate the remaining logistics for the mission.

Hermione readied the potions and watched a roomful of people transform into her best friend before disillusioning themselves and departing Grimmauld Place.

The waiting was the worst. Hermione stood in the foyer and watched the hands on the clock journey

slowly across its face. She hated waiting.

Kingsley and Moody, Harry, Ron, Severus, and most of the Weasleys and the Order. They were all at the Tonks cottage. Hermione was left behind. Maybe Draco was there, trapped between maintaining his cover and preserving the Order.

Anything could be happening.

Growing up, she would never have thought she'd be the kind of person who'd ever agree to be left behind when others were fighting. Gryffindor. She'd thought bravery would always place her at the front lines.

Pragmatism had stolen away any lustre of heroism from her.

She pressed her hand against the window and stared out at the dimming street. The full moon would be out in half an hour.

The clock continued to measure out the relentless passage of time. She braced herself with occlumency. She gathered up all her recent memories, sorted them neatly, and then pushed them away until her mind was clear.

The Death Eaters waiting at the Tonks cottage were not trainees. Fred stumbled through the door with his hand pressed to the side of his head. His ear had been sliced off by a curse. Moody returned with an arm and shoulder so badly maimed that Hermione initially feared he'd lose it. Remus was in the process of transforming when Tonks burst through the door and dragged him down into the basement.

Two Harrys came through the door a few minutes later. One was groaning and leaning heavily on the other.

"Come on, Ron. We're here. Someone, get him a pain potion!" the real Harry said, half-falling as he dragged the Harry-who-was-Ron further into the foyer.

Hermione dropped next to them and whipped out her wand. Ron was burning up and only half lucid. The combination of latent lycanthropy and the full moon had him writhing in agony.

"Fuck!! Fucking hell." Ron was sobbing as he arched backward until it looked like his spine would snap. "Make it stop. Make it stop!!!"

He buried his nails in his shoulder, clawing at himself. Harry struggled to pin Ron's arms down and prevent him from maiming himself.

Ron's arms, legs, and body kept rippling and snapping as the polyjuice wore off. Even once his features re-emerged, the popping and rippling of his body didn't cease. The bones in his shoulders and arms keep breaking and stretching and then snapping back into place. His fingers were curled into claws, and he dragged them through the hardwood floor, screaming, tearing his nails off. Snarling in agony as his body fought against the partial transformation.

Hermione and Harry both shot stunners at his head. Ron barely flinched. He whirled and swiped at Hermione's throat, but she cast a shield a moment before he struck.

"Stun him! Everyone stun him!" Hermione scrambled back as quickly as she could as Ron twisted

and lurched and lunged again.

It took ten stunners to knock him out.

Hermione sat in the middle of the floor, panting, as Neville and Seamus and several others took Ron's unconscious body down into the basement.

Harry was on the floor beside her, gripping her hand so tightly she thought the bones might crack.

"I didn't know. I didn't know it would be like that." Harry sounded lost. Hermione looked down at their hands. "It can't get out. The wolf can't get out." She stared at the blood and gouges on the floor. "We may need to discuss having Remus actually bite him."

They were still sitting on the floor together when Kingsley came through the door, looking weary.

"We lost at least three," Kingsley said. "We won't know who until everyone has reported back."

Sturgis Podmore, Susan Bones, and five other Resistance fighters failed to return to Grimmauld Place. They were presumed dead.

It was easier to hope for their deaths than fear they'd been captured.

Hermione ran into Tonks after the Order debriefing. Their eyes met and Hermione studied Tonks' expression. The concern and suspicion that had been visible the day before had vanished.

Moody or Kingsley had obliviated her before she'd left the cottage.

Hermione lay in bed that night, staring up at the ceiling. Kingsley had brought back a classified scroll of analysis on the shackle removed from Ron. They couldn't bring the shackle back without bringing the trace.

Hermione had done a preliminary study of the magic. It was solid spellwork. The shackle was made of tungsten, strong but magically conductive. The spell detail for how the shackle recognized a caster as bearing a Dark Mark was based on an ingeniously complex arithmantical formula and a charmwork technique Hermione had never encountered before.

She turned the information over and over in her mind and didn't know what to do. The information was already partly obsolete. The next shackle would be updated. More difficult or even impossible for the Order to remove.

Even if she found a fault to exploit, the Order wouldn't necessarily be able to take advantage of it. They'd have to decide whether to sit on the information until a vital point, or use it immediately. Any flaw they exploited would result in Sussex redesigning the shackles again.

It was like the Enigma code; if the Order managed to break through the enchantments, it would only result in the Death Eaters perfecting it more quickly.

She rolled onto her side and wondered if the shackles would have been invented if Draco hadn't enabled the Order to stage so many prison break-ins; if the Order hadn't made such an elaborate attack in June and destroyed the original curse division.

Was it inevitable? Or had they caused it? If they hadn't, would there have been any other way for the Resistance to have lasted so long? Or would the war have already ended? She didn't know. She

could only wonder.

Her bed felt colder than it ever had before.

She slept for two hours before she couldn't any longer. She went down to the kitchen in Grimmauld Place and made tea.

She looked at the scroll of analysis again and then stared out the window at the full moon. Luminous, cold silver. She had loved the moon as a child. The monthly evolution and subtle beauty had always entranced her. Since meeting Remus in third year, the moon had grown tragic and ominous. Its beauty a harbinger of pain.

Ron would grow to hate the moon.

She wrapped her hands around her mug and felt the heat seep into her hands.

She felt cold. On the outside. On the inside. She felt cold.

She would always feel cold now. There would always be a trace of it in her.

She laid her head on the table and traced grain of the wood under her fingertips. She missed Draco. She wanted to touch him. She wanted to bury herself in his arms and forget her whole life.

The war had eaten her until she felt as though there were only the meagrest shreds left. As though its claws had sunk into her chest, and she could no more tear herself free than she could rip out her lungs and expect to survive. With Draco, she felt alive. Like she was breathing again after years of forgetting how to do anything but survive.

She held the mug tighter until the heat began to fade.

She didn't even know how to contact him. Not unless it was on behalf of the Order. She'd given him her word that she wouldn't summon him otherwise.

She spun the ring around her finger.

She wondered if he'd been at the Tonks cottage. If he'd been injured or injured anyone.

She started slightly and made a mental note. He'd used his analgesic potion on her wrist. Even if he could replace everything else, it was unlikely that Severus had shared that potion with the Death Eater army. She'd have to take him a replacement vial when she saw him again.

She also needed more fluxweed. She began cataloguing places she'd be able to find it growing. Then she paused, her heart sinking.

No more foraging.

Hermione bit her lip and looked down at her hands. Foraging had been hers. It had been terrifying and dangerous, but it had been hers. A chance to escape Grimmauld Place for a few hours; to feel the wind on her face and the cold of the early morning dew on her hands; to notice the seasons slowly emerging.

She looked wistfully out the window of Grimmauld Place.

She felt like bird whose wings had been slowly clipped shorter and shorter until they were nearly

shorn away.

She sighed and turned away from the window. She stared at the scroll again, marking notes about potential resources to look up.

The next Tuesday she went to the shack without foraging beforehand for the first time. She felt nervous as she stared up at the door. She wasn't sure—

It was always impossible to predict what Draco would do next.

Her jaw trembled and her fingers wavered a breath away from door knob. She withdrew her hand, curling it into a fist and forcing herself to take a deep breath.

This was her job, she reminded herself. It didn't matter what happened from one week to the next. It never mattered. It was still her job.

She swallowed and pressed her lips tightly together as she reached out and opened the door.

Draco appeared as she stepped inside.

He apparated in, nearly on top of her, grabbed her firmly, and backed her into the wall as his lips crashed into hers. She could feel his hunger; in his hands as he dragged them along her body; in his breath as he drew a ragged gasp against her mouth.

Hermione's eyes widened with surprise as she was crushed against him. Her fingers caught his robes. Her eyes fluttered closed, and she kissed him back.

His hand came up and captured her jaw, just below her ear. His fingers curled around to the base of her neck, arching her head back as he kissed her more deeply.

She clung to him, and he pulled her closer, wrapping his arm around her waist. The whole world dropped away. Hermione kissed him ravenously. She wanted to pour herself into him.

He pulled her up, and she wrapped her legs around his hips. Her fingers tangled in his hair, and she felt his teeth against her lips and tongue.

It was like falling. He had her pinned against the wall. She hardly knew where she ended and he began. Her lungs were catching fire but she wouldn't tear her mouth from his.

Then she really was falling. The wall behind her vanished, and she was on a mattress somewhere canopied. She'd barely felt the apparition.

She only pulled her mouth from Draco's for a moment to glance around before crashing their lips together once more. He wrenched her shirt off, and she jerked his trousers open. Quick. Hard. She was ready for him. She raked her nails across his back as he sank into her.

There wasn't space in her mind for anything else. Touching him. Moving against him. Feeling him. The world had reduced itself to a single point: Draco, his hands and eyes, the beating of his heart. She wrapped her arms around him as she kissed him, and kissed him, and kissed him.

Afterwards they lay entwined for several minutes, their foreheads pressed together as they panted.

He kissed between her eyes, and his palm brushed against her face. Then he drew back and ran his hands along her body, looking over her arms and torso carefully. She lifted her head to see what he

was doing.

“You weren’t at the battle at the cottage, were you? I didn’t think any of the Potters there dueled the way you do, but it was impossible to be sure.” He brushed his fingers along the shell of her ear and then down along her shoulder.

Hermione dropped back and shook her head, looking him over as well, trailing her hand along his torso. He had no visible injuries.

“I wasn’t there. It was a proper raid; Kingsley wouldn’t bring me out.” Her jaw trembled, and she looked away. “You won’t need to worry. I’m not—,” the words twisted in her mouth, “I’m not permitted to leave the safe houses anymore, aside from liaising. So you won’t need to worry.”

Draco gave an audible sigh of relief and sank down against her, brushing another kiss on her forehead.

Hermione closed her eyes and pressed her lips together.

“What’s wrong?”

She looked up and found Draco staring intently down at her, his expression closed.

The corner of her mouth quirked. “I liked foraging. It was—the only bearable thing I got to do sometimes.” Her eyes dropped down, and she entwined her fingers with his. She stared at his hand in hers. “My life just keeps getting smaller and darker.”

There was a pause.

“I’m sorry.”

She shrugged under him. “It’s not like you ordered it. You said stay alive; Kingsley is the one who decided that meant I wasn’t allowed to forage or leave the safe houses. I understand. He’s responsible for an entire war effort. I’m not going to ask him to structure it around my personal feelings. I just—” she paused, inhaling. “I’m still coming to terms with it.”

“I didn’t realise it was important to you.” She was silent for a moment, hesitating. “Some days—it was the closest thing to freedom I still had.”

She felt his whole body freeze.

“Just—just until the end of the war,” he said in a tone that was half plea and half vow.

Hermione snorted. “Just till then? When will that be?” She gave him a bitter smile. “What end of the war do you think will somehow go well for either of us? If the Order somehow wins, I’m sure the International Confederation will suddenly be eager to be involved. They’ll preside over all the trials. I already told you, a lot of my activity has been largely unsanctioned, and the Order is supposed to be democratic. When it all comes out—” she looked away, unable to meet his eyes, “—it won’t paint a very pretty picture.” She raised her eyebrows and gave a small sigh. “If I’m lucky they’ll just take my wand away for a few years. There are certain things—”

Her chest tightened as she thought about the small room within the cave at the beach. The blood. Flayed hands and feet. Over the course of a year, Gabrielle had gotten crueler and more creative. Injuries were rarely reversible now, and Kingsley did not rein her in because the Order *needed* the

information.

Hermione's name sat beside Kingsley's in every prisoner file. Her handwriting neatly cataloguing in precise, clinical terms the injuries she'd healed, the exact condition of each prisoner when she placed them in stasis.

*I was there. I knew. I was complicit.*

She swallowed. "I'm not as good a person as you think. I—I could very well end up in Azkaban."

Draco was silent for a moment as he stared at her. His fingers twitched and tightened around her. "Run. Say the word, and I'll get you out. You don't have to stay here."

A craven part of herself rose up and unfurled at his words. Out. Free. Far away from the war.

She didn't know how much she wanted it until she heard it offered by someone who meant it.

The idea of living without the war—she wanted to.

"You know I won't," she said, looking up into his eyes.

His expression was bitter, and his eyes flickered, showing tired resignation. He nodded. "The offer stands. Give the word, I'll get you out."

She studied him. "What about you?"

He gave a bitter laugh. "If I could run, I would have vanished while my mother was alive."

Hermione nodded slowly. He would never be there if he had any choice. "Of course. Would you go now, if you could?" He stared at her, his eyes were molten silver and unwavering. "With you, I would."

"Then—we'll go together. After the war." She pressed his hand against her chest and felt her heart beat against it. "When the war is over. We'll both run somewhere no one knows us. We'll—disappear. When it's over."

His eyes flickered for a moment before he met her gaze and smiled faintly. "Of course, Granger."

He was lying.

They both were.

It was a fairytale to think they could run together. That things would end neatly enough for that.

She squeezed his hand tighter and met his eyes until the illusion faded away.

"There was a trace on Ron," she said after a minute. "From Sussex. Would you be able to get us more information about how they work? And what other prototypes they're working on?"

"I'll see what I can do." His tone was clipped. He drew away and rolled his neck so that it cracked.

Hermione stared at him. He was impossibly elegant but too thin. Nearly gaunt. His skin was pale as marble, and in the dim morning light, he could have been a figure in a painting. His scars made the scene macabre. She couldn't look at him and not see the war. It was carved into him.

She sat up and fixed the pins in her hair.

“I hate your hair like that,” he said abruptly.

Hermione glanced over and arched an eyebrow. “I could crop it instead.”

His expression grew offended. She gave him a wry smile and shrugged. “I have to keep it out of the way when working. I’m always on call. It makes the most sense to keep it this way.”

He looked away for several minutes. “I want to see you more.”

The corner of her mouth quirked as her heart caught with relief. “Alright. Do you have a time?”

He turned to look at her, and she could see the hunger in his eyes. Possessive. Ravenous.

He would drag her from the war and hide her the instant she let him. She could see the conflict in his eyes. The sight of Draco restraining himself as he stared at her and weighed his options was familiar. Want. Want. Want. She felt it like her heartbeat.

If he couldn’t hide her, he would hoard her to himself as much as he was able.

She’d fallen for a dragon.

“I’ve always been on call for you too. I have a six hour shift in the hospital ward every afternoon, but the rest of my work is flexible. You can call me, and I’ll come as soon as I can.”

“I’ll call you then, when I can. If the ring activates once, it’s not Order related.”

Draco pulled his cloak off the floor and pulled out a scroll.

“Any new orders this week?” he asked as he offered it to her. His mouth twisted derisively as he asked the question. “Aside from information on the trace?”

She shook her head. “It’s the main priority.”

As she reached and took hold of the scroll, he pulled it back, drawing her towards him. He closed a hand around her wrist.

She felt the parchment slip from her fingers as his other hand slid up her throat, and he kissed her.

He kissed her, and she kissed him.

*Flashback 31*

**April 2003**

Draco called her. Often.

Sometimes, his duties in Voldemort's army came to an end in the late evening, but most of the time he called her in the early hours of morning. Hermione would work in her potion cabinet or research until her ring burned. Then she'd slip out of Grimmauld Place and apparate to Whitecroft.

She'd barely step through the door before Draco would appear, snatch her up, and apparate them elsewhere. Always a hotel. Rarely the same one, even from one night to the next.

He'd kiss her, cradling her face in his hands, and it felt felt like he was breathing her in.

Then he'd step back enough to look at her.

"You're alright? Are you alright? Has anything happened to you?" He'd run his hands over her to check as he asked.

Every time the same question, as though he didn't believe it until he'd verified it personally.

She hadn't expected him to be so obsessively worried. She'd observed his immediate arrival at Whitecroft over the months; the careful way he'd run his eyes over her after she'd been attacked in Hampshire. She hadn't considered how deep the fear cut into him.

She'd feel herself unwinding under his touch as his fingers ran down her arms, over her hands, and up her spine.

"I'm fine, Draco. You don't need to worry."

The words never seemed to have any effect. He'd turn her face up towards his and stare into her eyes as though he expected to find something in them.

She'd look up at him and calmly let him reassure himself.

Whatever had happened to his mother, Narcissa had never told him fully; either because she couldn't, or in an attempt to spare him. Withholding it had probably been the worst choice.

Draco was like her. He obsessed over what he didn't know more than anything else.

She'd meet his eyes, "Draco, I'm fine. Nothing has happened to me." When he was certain she truly was wholly uninjured, it was like a tension inside him would finally break. He'd gather her in his arms, sighing with relief while he rested his head on hers.

You did this to him, she reminded herself, and she wrapped her arms tightly around him. You guessed where he was vulnerable, and you exploited it.

She'd run her own fingers over him, trying to detect any injuries on him before he kissed her again.

“Draco, let me heal you.”

She never had and never would heal anyone else the way she healed Draco: in his arms, pressed against his body. She’d slide her hands along him and press open-mouthed kisses on his shoulders, hands, and face while she muttered spells. She’d check him over meticulously until he plucked her wand from her fingers and flung it across the room. Then he’d push her down in the bed and take her slowly.

It was nearly always deliriously slowly. He’d stare into her eyes until she almost felt their minds touching.

Other times, he’d arrive drenched in Dark Magic. It would cling to his clothes and skin. When he was like that, he was always more desperate. Harder. Faster. Trying to lose himself in something he could feel. Against a wall. Or just on the floor of the hotel room where they landed.

His kisses tasted like ice and sin, and Hermione drank them in until she was gasping.

“You’re mine. You’re mine.” He’d repeat the words over and over like a mantra. “Say it. Say you’re mine.”

“I’m yours, Draco,” she’d promise against his lips, or staring into his eyes.

He’d entwine his fingers with hers and press their foreheads together, and sometimes his whole body would shake. She’d wrap her arms around him and press kisses into his hair.

“I promise, Draco. I’m always going to be yours.”

There was a possessive terror in his eyes when he stared at her—in the way he touched her— as though he always expected it to be the last time he ever saw her.

On the days he didn’t summon her, she’d walk through Grimmauld Place feeling as though she couldn’t breathe until she felt her ring burn.

Then she was the one who would desperately demand to know if he was alright.

“Don’t die, Draco.”

It was always the last thing she said to him.

The moment before he apparated away, as he stood in his Death Eater robes, she’d say it rather than goodbye. She’d catch his chin in her hand and stare up into his eyes. “Be careful. Don’t die.”

He’d dip his head forward and kiss her palm as his cool, grey eyes locked onto hers. “You’re mine. I’ll always come for you.”

He always did.

Each day felt as though the odds were being pushed higher. Steeper. She wasn’t sure how far the runes and his own determination could take him before it reached a point of utter improbability and everything came crashing down.

She could feel it.

He was walking a razor’s edge.

When he slept, she stared at his face and willed him to survive the war.

They'd run away when it was over. Far away. So far no one would ever find them. She promised herself she'd find a way. She promised it to him: that there would be an after.

There were moments when they almost forgot the war around them. Eating breakfasts ordered by room service. Arguing whether food from a greasy spoon constituted as actual food. Taking advantage of the unreasonably large bathtubs that his hotel suites always had. Kissing him.

She could spend a decade kissing him; feeling the burning reverence in the way he touched her.

The moment their lips touched, he'd crush her body against his. His hands would slide along her throat and back to the nape of her neck, tangling his fingers in her hair as he deepened the kiss. He'd cradle her cheek in the palm of his hand and then slip it down along her body. Then, when she was gasping for breath, he'd pull his mouth away and start kissing along her throat. Sucking on her pulse point while he pulled at her clothes. She'd barely notice her clothing sliding off and falling to the floor as he stripped her and explored her bared skin. As she unbuttoned his shirt and slid her hands along his body.

He'd twist the clasp of her bra, and then jerk it off before his hands would dart up to palm her breasts and tease her until she was whimpering. His mouth would glide along the juncture of her neck and shoulder as he kissed and nipped his way across her skin.

"Perfect." "Beautiful." "Mine." "Mine." He'd breathe the words against her body as he bared her to himself. As he pushed into her. When he gripped her against himself. As she came apart in his arms or under his mouth. When he entwined their fingers, and she felt his hold tighten as he came.

"I'm going to take care of you. I swear, Hermione, I'm always going to take care of you." He'd mutter the words against her skin or into her hair in such a low voice she could barely hear them.

One night at the beginning of May, when she was wrapped in his arms and half asleep, she heard him repeating it; as though it were a promise he were making to himself again and again. As though he couldn't make himself stop saying it.

She lifted her head and held his face between her hands so that she could look into his eyes.

"Draco, I'm alright. Nothing is going to happen to me."

He just stared at her with the same bitterly resigned expression he worn while training her. He was bracing himself, waiting for what he regarded as inevitable.

The war was twisted around them like a nest of thorns they couldn't escape from.

He subsided and rested his head against her chest, wrapping his arms around her while she tangled her fingers in his hair.

She could still feel him repeating the words.

She hesitated for several minutes before she spoke.

"Tell me about your mother, Draco. Tell me everything you could never tell anyone." He stiffened and was silent. She slid her fingers over his shoulders and traced along the scars from the runes. "Using Occlumency is just hiding it. You can tell me, I'll help you carry it. Tell me about your

mother."

He didn't speak or move for such a long time she wondered if he'd fallen asleep. Then he turned his head just enough that she could see his profile. His expression was carefully closed, but she could see him considering.

"I'd never seen anyone tortured before," he said at last. "She was—the first person I ever saw tortured. He—," Hermione felt his jaw roll as he hesitated, "—he experimented on her and let —a few other Death Eaters contribute ideas about what to do to her. To punish the Malfoys."

As he spoke, his eyes gradually grew wider and his expression unmasked. He stared across the room, his eyes far away.

Hermione watched, and she could see him, just sixteen and home for the holidays.

Home. Walking unknowingly into a nightmare that he would never, never escape from.

"I thought—," his voice was suddenly younger. Boyish. "For a while, I thought that if I killed Dumbledore soon enough that somehow she'd recover. That I could fix it—if I could succeed. But—she was a shadow of herself when I returned from school. I think—she had tried to hold on over the summer, when I was being trained. But when I was gone, she broke —"

He was quiet for a moment.

He started to speak again but then pressed his mouth shut. His lips twitched as though he kept choosing and then discarding what he was going to say next.

"It wasn't even a month. I wasn't even gone a month," he finally said.

Hermione laced her fingers in his hair. He closed his eyes and drew his chin down.

"It was supposed to all be reversible, to motivate me, nothing to physically maim her. But he wrecked her mind. Using legilimency for torture is his favourite technique. She had seizures, mostly small ones, but occasionally they'd be severe. Especially later. She just—wasted away inside that cage. When she was startled, she'd close her eyes and start rocking and making these whimpering noises inside her mouth. She wouldn't stop for hours, and I couldn't— couldn't always stay with her—because I had to train."

He wouldn't look at Hermione as he spoke. He kept staring across the room. His voice was low and it wavered.

"The day I killed Dumbledore, the Dark Lord demanded we have dinner with him. To celebrate—he said we were celebrating my success. She'd been released for only a few hours, and he wanted her play hostess. Her tremors were so severe she could barely hold the silverware. Her fork kept rattling against the plate, and then she'd drop it and panic when she tried to pick it up. Apparently the noise was distracting. So the Dark Lord took a steak knife and drove it through her left hand and into the table. Then he left her there, bleeding, until he retired. I was seated across from her, and she just looked at me the whole time, shaking her head to warn me not to do anything."

He gripped Hermione's hand. "I couldn't—do anything. I tried to shield her. I kept her in her rooms as much as possible. I brought in healers to help her recover. The mind healers couldn't do a damn thing. I should have had her treated sooner. That's what they all told me. That I should have gotten

her treated sooner."

Hermione squeezed his hand and slid her fingers across his runes. Unhesitating, cunning, unfailing, ruthless, and unyielding; driven to succeed.

To avenge his mother. In penance for all the ways he felt he'd failed her.

"I'm so sorry, Draco."

He was quiet. He closed his eyes and drew a sharp breath.

"Then—" his voice cut off. He tried again. "Then—" Draco's mouth twisted, and he went silent for several seconds. "Then—she'd just started to recover a bit, and I hesitated at the Finch-Fletchleys. There was a little girl; she couldn't have been in primary school yet. Unforgivables—there's no cheating with them. You have to feel it. You have to mean it. I was ordered to use the cruciatus and I couldn't—I couldn't make it work. She was—so little."

He swallowed. "Bellatrix cursed me and the girl before letting Fenrir Greyback have her instead. He—enjoyed children. When my failure was reported, the Dark Lord took it as a sign I wasn't committed or motivated enough. He had my mother brought out so he could demonstrate how to properly perform the cruciatus."

There was a long silence.

"She'd—just started to get better when it happened."

Hermione suspected that her hand would have bruises where their fingers were entwined.

"Bellatrix did care for her sister, in a way. She never spoke against the Dark Lord, but she did try to keep me from failing. The summer before I returned to school, and when she realised that my punishments would be meted out on my mother, she poured everything into getting me to a point where it happened rarely. I asked her to teach me everything she'd learned from the Dark Lord, and she did."

His voice had shifted. It grew more familiar as the story moved through his life. Traces of his hard, clipped tone started to emerge.

"I tried everything to get my mother away. To get her out. But I couldn't run with her. I had everything prepared—but I couldn't convince her to leave without me. I considered trying to imperio her, to make her to go. But I knew her. If I got knocked out or died, the second it dropped, she would have come back to find me. And I couldn't lock her away somewhere so that she couldn't. I wasn't—I didn't want to be someone who caged her. I didn't want her to feel trapped again."

His voice grew deadened. "When she died—I arrived to find Lestrange Manor in ruins. I didn't know what had happened until I was summoned. It was barely mentioned that she'd been there—that it counted for anything that she'd died. Dumbledore's wand had split in half. Something to do with Bellatrix somehow. The wand was the only thing that mattered. He killed every Death Eater who survived to report back. I was standing there, surrounded by the bodies, trying not to start screaming."

He fell silent and didn't say anything else for a long time.

Hermione shifted out from under him and sat up. There was a dull, tearing sensation in her chest as she stared down at him. His eyes were guarded as he looked back her.

She touched him lightly on the cheek. “Draco—I am not your mother.” He flinched and started to open his mouth, but she continued without letting him interrupt. “Moody and Kingsley are not going to hurt me if you fail an assignment. They are not going to torture or endanger me to punish you. I’m not a hostage. I’m in this war because I choose to be. I am not fragile. I am not going to break. Please,” she brushed her thumb over the arch of his cheekbone, “believe that about me.”

“Let me get you out. Please, Hermione. I swear to god, it won't affect my aid to the Order. Let me get you out.”

She shook her head. “I can’t leave. I am loyal to the Order. I’m not going to run while everyone else is fighting. We fight this war together. Let me help you. You don’t have to do everything alone.”

His eyes flickered, and she saw the despair and resignation in them. It tore at something in her.

“Draco, you can’t ask me to run away from the war.”

His lip curled and he sneered. “Why not? How have you not already done enough for them? They sold you. What if I’d—,” his voice cut off. He looked away from her. “The same offer from someone who’d meant it. You would have still—and if I hadn’t trained you, Potter would have still left you on your own in that field.”

She traced her thumb across his skin. There was the barest, faintest line of a scar there, from where she’d hexed him. “I agreed to it, Draco, all of it. No one made me. We don’t get to choose when we’ve done enough and then leave others behind to bear the consequences. That isn’t how a war like this works.”

He clenched his jaw and stared up at her bitterly.

He didn’t care. He didn’t care whether anyone survived the war but her. They could all die, and he wouldn’t care.

He’d made an Unbreakable Vow. Even if he could get his Dark Mark off, he couldn’t run, not as long as the war continued. He’d trapped himself in heart of it.

Hermione gave a sad sigh and dropped her head, burying her face in his shoulder. He wrapped his arms tightly around her.

She was almost asleep when she heard the faint whisper of his voice begin once again. “I’m going to take care of you. I swear, I’m always going to take care of you.”

The rescues ground to a halt. Kingsley put them on hold until more was known about the trace from Sussex. Early prototypes of the shackles were being rolled out to all the prisons.

The Resistance was almost entirely driven underground and into the Muggle world. There were so many dark beings and Snatchers it was difficult to move.

Kingsley began leaning even more heavily in his reconnaissance team and utilising Draco within Voldemort’s army. Misinformation. Sabotage. As though the Death Eater army were a machine to be deconstructed. The envelopes with orders kept growing thicker every time Hermione delivered

them. Draco rarely mentioned what he did, but she could tell he was on the verge of breaking from the pressure. He grew steadily more and more desperate each time he saw her.

It burned in her. To watch him eroding under everything he was expected to maintain and produce for both sides.

Almost all pressure on Hermione from the Order vanished. She was a collar around Draco's throat; Kingsley and Moody had nothing more urgent to ask than that she maintain it.

She was simply left to live with it.

She felt like a caged animal inside Grimmauld Place. She travelled from safe house to safe house just for a change of scenery.

When she wasn't healing or caring for Ginny, she poured her energy into research and experimental magic. She went further into researching Dark Magic than she ever had in the past. Maybe the Order wouldn't use it, but Draco might.

She tried to find a way around the shackles. Draco regularly brought updated scrolls of analysis for her, and she pored over them, trying to find a flaw, something to exploit. They were ingenious. They were a work of art.

They horrified Hermione with their rapid evolution.

In addition to irremovable traces, Sussex began experimenting with shackles intended to suppress magic. Tungsten inlaid with iron. Tungsten plated with copper or aluminium. Shackles with wand core materials.

She'd barely sleep unless she was with Draco. The rest of the time, she'd just lie in cold terror at the thought of what would happen to anyone captured. The Order might not ever be able to save any of them.

Death Eaters were already being given the shackles to carry in order to more easily apprehend members of the Resistance. Once closed, a shackle couldn't be reopened without two bearers of the Dark Mark performing an incantation variant of the Morsmordre.

Dean Thomas appeared at Grimmauld Place a day after capture. His wand hand severed. He'd stolen a knife and sawn his hand off at the wrist in order to escape.

A week later Severus brought word that the shackles were being moved out of Sussex in order to expand production. They would now come in sets of two.

Draco brought Hermione a set of the prototypes one evening and watched her analyse it.

They looked almost like bracelets. Hermione built an elaborate web of analytic magic around it, dissecting all the components; the alchemy, charms, the arithmancy, the runes set in the iron core.

She spent hours trying to find a flaw, until she fell asleep in the middle of it and woke to find Draco carrying her to bed.

"I can't—there isn't a way around them." Her brain felt clouded by exhaustion. She was almost shaking with frustration. "There has to be something. Using imperio won't work, it shows up in the spell signature and cancels the incantation. I thought, just cut through them, but the core is charmed

to explode. I'm just not—maybe I have to come at it from a different angle. My alchemy is all self-taught. Maybe I just haven't researched enough."

She started to pull away from him and tried to go back toward the stacks of books she'd brought. Draco stopped her. He slid one arm around her waist and wrapped the other around her shoulders.

"You can't save everyone, Granger."

She stilled and stared despairingly across the room.

"I don't know how we're going to win this war," she finally said.

Draco was silent. There was nothing to say that wouldn't be a lie.

She lifted her hand and gripped his arm around her shoulders.

"I don't know how to save anyone. Everything I do just puts it off so that they die in a worse way. I wish—I wish I'd never become a healer."

She'd never admitted it to anyone before. That she hated it.

She told him about the horcruxes. She wasn't supposed to. She hadn't been cleared to. She told him anyway. Everything she knew, about their creation and destruction, and all the Order's ideas about what they could be. About the Founders' lost items.

"We think there might be one in Hogwarts," she said when she showed him all her research. "But I don't know how many he could have. There couldn't be more than five, could there? Splitting his soul like that—it's poison in the body. It will eat him from the inside out. His current form is the best restoration he could manage with a regeneration potion. It should have returned him to his physical prime, but his soul is so deteriorated making a sort of body was the most it could do. So there has to be a limit to the horcruxes. I don't think he can keep making them. If we can destroy all the horcruxes, he'll become unstable enough that even if no one kills him, eventually he'll just cease to exist. But we don't know where they could be. There's so little information about his past."

"He gave one to my father during the first war?"

"When the Chamber of Secrets was opened during our second year, it was caused by the soul fragment possessing Ginny Weasley. Your father put the horcrux in with her books in an attempt to discredit Arthur Weasley." "If they were made during the first war, and he entrusted one to his followers—I'll look into it. You should have told me sooner."

"I shouldn't even be telling you now." She rested her hand over his heart. "I wasn't trying to add something else. I just—I don't have anyone to talk to. It helps me to think if I can talk aloud."

He snorted. "If it ends this, it's worth it. What is the Order doing? Everything Moody and Shacklebolt assign me is just buying time." His voice was vibrating with fury.

"Draco…"

He didn't say anything else, but his rage was palpable.

He didn't trust Kingsley or Moody or the Order. He was terrified if he died, they might sell her again to try to survive. And she couldn't promise him that she wouldn't. She would do anything to

win the war. He knew that. She suspected that fear drove him more than anything else.

He wrapped his arms around her, and she could feel it in his hands, in the way he touched her.

She rested her head on his chest and listened to his heart.

"You should get body-armor," she said. "I was researching it. Ukrainian Ironbelly hide. It's lightweight, highly resistant to magic, and almost impenetrable to physical attacks. If you wear it under your robes, no one will even know it's there. It could save your life someday."

He didn't say anything. He was still staring down at her research on the horcruxes.

Sometimes they didn't leave the shack in Whitecroft immediately. He'd arrive with so many injuries he'd be going into shock. Other times, she'd feel the tremors of cruciatus in his hands.

She'd heal him and then sit with his head in her lap while he stabilised. She'd treat the tremors in his arms and hands while he floated on the edge of consciousness. She muttered apologies to him under her breath as she tapped her wand tip across his hands, bending, and rubbing, and massaging his fingers until they stopped twitching.

*You're killing him. You're killing him. This is because of you.*

She let herself cry over him when he wasn't conscious to see it. She gripped his hands in hers and tried to fix him.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry." She said it over and over.

She'd wipe her eyes and banish all her tears before she rennervated him. She'd feel the tension tear through his body as he regained consciousness and then feel him breathe when he looked up and saw her. He'd apparate them to a hotel and sleep with his arms wrapped possessively around her.

When even Draco's presence was insufficient to quiet her demons, she'd study his face and listen to his heartbeat, quietly promising him, "I'm going to take care of you. I swear, I'm always going to take care of you."

*Flashback 32*

**May 2003**

It was near the end of May when the Death Eaters launched an attack on a Muggle town in Surrey. It was a trap. They didn't even bother to conceal the fact they were luring the Resistance out.

There was no need to. The Resistance would go anyway.

Hermione watched the Order depart to join the fight and worked with Padma to transfer the hospital ward down into the foyer and expand the walls of the sitting room. They called in several of the Resistance members who functioned as healers and nurses at the hospice safe houses.

Poppy Pomfrey had caught Black Cat Flu and was under quarantine. A disease that caused chronic bad luck was one of the last things that the Order could handle sweeping through the Resistance.

The clock ticked relentlessly on while Hermione paced, carefully and meticulously organising her mind. She gathered all her memories of Draco, shoving them into the furthest recesses of her consciousness where she kept her memories of her parents.

She could not think about Draco. She could not worry about whether he was fighting. Whether Kingsley or Moody had him doing anything that put him into extreme danger in order to give the Resistance a slight edge.

She had to work. Thinking about it wouldn't change anything.

She walled it all away.

Seamus appeared at the door carrying an unfamiliar woman and Michael Corner in his arms. "Vampire," he said, nodding towards the woman. "I dunno about him." He dropped them and quickly apparated away again. The foyer began filling with bodies. Muggles, Resistance fighters; they were all being brought to Hermione and Padma.

Hermione poured Blood-Replenishing Potion and the antidote for the bite down the woman's throat before trying to quickly diagnose what had happened to Michael. A diagnostic charm indicated his organs were shutting down, but she couldn't figure out why. She started casting an analytic web on the curse signature in order to try to identify it. Crack. Kingsley appeared, carrying Tonks. Tonks was screaming at the top of her lungs; her eyes were rolled back in her head. Hermione cast a stasis charm on Michael in the hope of buying time and rushed over. Tonks' arm had been cursed; the skin was sliding away as her body flayed itself. Hermione cancelled the curse and cast a spell to soothe the pain before holding a vial of Skin-Regrowth Potion against Tonks' lips. Blood and a black, acrid liquid spattered onto Hermione's sleeve. She glanced up sharply. "You're cursed," she said, watching a growing stain spread across Kingsley's left shoulder through his robes. "I have to get Potter out," he said, turning to leave.

She grabbed his arm. "It's close to your heart. Let me heal you." He pulled her hand off. "There's no

time. Get ready, we're bringing more your way." There was a crack as Parvati appeared, weighed down with four bodies. "Get them to Padma," Hermione said, chasing Kingsley as he swept out of Grimmauld Place. "Let me heal you, Kingsley." She reached out to grab him before he reached the edge of the protective wards. As her fingers closed around the fabric of his robes, he apparated. They both reappeared in the battlefield. It was a town square, hazy with dust, blood and residual magic. There were bodies everywhere.The Death Eaters were casting curses at the Resistance members who were trying to get the injured away. Dementors were floating overhead, Kissing anyone they came across. Hermione glanced around with horror. "Go back to Grimmauld Place! Your job is to stay in the safe houses, Granger." Kingsley snarled at her; his expression furious when he realized she was standing beside him. He cast a shield around them.

There was a scream of rage that Hermione recognised as belonging to Ron.

"Get back to the safe house, Granger," Kingsley said over his shoulder as he moved toward the sound. Hermione prepared to apparate but, just before she vanished, her eyes landed on a boy lying on the ground. His stomach was torn open, likely by a hag or a werewolf.

She knelt down and checked his pulse. Too late; he was already dead. There was a wand in his hand. A Resistance fighter. He couldn't have been fourteen.

A witch beside him had a necrosis curse crawling up her leg. She seemed to have passed out from the pain. There was another body on top of the witch; a young man who'd fallen across her. Hermione rolled him over to see whether he was still alive too. Instantly he sprang forward. Hermione felt fangs sink into her shoulder as he pulled her to the ground. Hermione cast a dark curse without pausing to think. The vampire crumbled. Hermione staggered to her feet, levitating the injured witch into her arms. She glanced around for anyone else within reach. A man two feet away appeared to have been attacked by a dementor. Hermione moved towards him to check whether he'd been fully Kissed. His soul was still intact, but he was hypothermic and in need of chocolate. An icy sensation came over her. She looked up sharply to find several dementors closing in. Hermione took a deep breath and cast a patronus. A flash of light shot from her wand, but her patronus failed to corporealise.

As her patronus drove away the dementors, she pulled the wizard's arm over her shoulders and readied herself to apparate. She sagged under the weight and cast a quick lightening charm. As she did so, there were several cracks of apparition. Hermione gripped the bodies more tightly as she looked up. Four masked Death Eaters had appeared less than ten feet away. One of them was facing her. He instantly whipped his wand forward.

Hermione's eyes widened, and she set her mind to Grimmauld Place. Destination. Determination. Deliberation.

She felt the curse collide with her chest as she vanished. She reappeared in the street outside Grimmauld Place, dropping the witch and wizard and falling forward with agonised gasp. She was vaguely aware of swearing, and someone grabbing her and dragging her up the steps into Grimmauld Place. She was flipped over and stared into the faces of Padma and several of the Resistance guards in charge of Grimmauld Place security during skirmishes. Hermione shuddered and tried not to sob. "What spell? What spell?" Padma's eyes were wide and panicked as she leaned over Hermione. Her wand was shaking in her hands.

Hermione gestured wordlessly towards her chest. Padma ripped Hermione's shirt open and gasped. The acid curse had struck Hermione squarely in the sternum. It had been powerfully cast. The boils were already burning deep into her bones and across her chest up to her collarbones. Padma rapidly cast the countercurse. Hermione lay on the floor and tried not to sob as Padma summoned potions from across the room.

She was burning. The agony from being cursed in the wrist was nothing compared to this. It was in the middle of her. She was barely aware of anything but the corrosive pain in the centre of herself. She couldn't make out sounds. She couldn't feel the rest of her body. All she could feel was that she was burning. Inside her chest. In her bones. Her skin. Like there was acid in her throat.

Surely someone would stun her. She was on the verge of pleading.

She closed her eyes tightly and waited for everything to stop.

"Hermione."

"Hermione." Padma's voice broke through the blur of agony.

Hermione forced herself to open her eyes and look up at Padma. "I can't remove your bones now," Padma said. Her voice was trembling as she poured the analgesic across Hermione's chest. "There are too many people dying—and I need you. There are too many curses here I don't know how to analyse. Besides the pain potions and the analgesic, what should I give you?" Hermione stared at Padma in blank horror for several seconds, struggling to make sense of the words.

She closed her eyes and tried to breathe shallowly before she forced herself to answer. Everything was burning. Even with the analgesic potion, the burning wasn't stopping. If she hadn't felt certain that screaming would have hurt more, she would have screamed until her voice gave out. She swallowed repeatedly before she forced herself to speak. "Strengthener. A drop of Felix Felicis. And a Draught of Peace," she said in as low voice as she could manage. She could feel vibrations of her vocal chords in all the pockets of burned flesh.

Padma carefully poured the potions into Hermione's mouth and lightly massaged the analgesic into the skin before dripping small drops of Essence of Dittany into each of the boils. Hermione lay on the floor for several minutes, waiting for the moment when the potions kicked in, in the hopes that somehow things would become somewhat bearable.

She could feel the damage in her bones. It inched toward her lungs as she struggled to breathe. She forced herself to stand and shakily flicked her wand to repair her shirt as she made her way across the foyer.

She was dying.

It felt like she was dying.

She forced herself to mentally separate from the pain and set to work, immediately moving to the most difficult injuries while Padma and the other healers tended to everything else.

Every movement was painful. Breathing was agonising. Hermione couldn't so much as twitch her arm without feeling every bit of damage in her chest. She bit down on her lip and forced herself not to cry; if her chest heaved from weeping, she was afraid she'd black out.

Her lungs kept agitating her with the urge to cough. Her esophagus contracting, and her chest jerking slightly as she fought against it. If she coughed, she would probably fracture her sternum. She nearly cast a diagnostic, but she didn't think she could handle knowing how much bone damage she was ignoring.

She downed a cough suppressing potion and forced herself to breathe shallowly. Recovering would be slow. Just repairing it would likely take hours.

She turned slowly, taking in the seemingly endless number of hospital stretchers she was surrounded by.

There were so many injuries. Hag disembowelments and vampire bites. Werewolf maulings. Dozens of curses that Hermione had never seen before. Sussex was a death chamber, slowly wiping out the Resistance. She recognised some of them as curses Severus and Draco had warned her about and provided counter-curses to. Deep cuts that wouldn't close; non-serious looking boils that suddenly swelled and burst, causing the individuals to begin hemorrhaging. She pulled conjured scorpions, vipers, and even a lobster out of stomachs and chests.

The air stank of internal organs and blood and Dark Magic.

She healed and healed, and the bodies brought to her never seemed to stop. She thought she saw Harry and Ron arrive, but they were gone again before she could look away from the injured Muggle boy she was healing.

As she performed a complicated spell to repair a shredded large intestine, she gradually became aware of someone standing beside her. She glanced over and found Kreacher looking up at her. "Is Potter's Mudblood alright?"

She stared at him blankly but didn't reply as she moved on to the next injury with a wince, downing another cough suppressing potion as she went. "Potter's Mudblood is hurt." Kreacher said in a tone that was as conclusive as it was derisive. "Kreacher, get out of here." Padma said, her eyes narrowed and furious. "I need someone with basic healing over here." "How hurt is Potter's Mudblood?" "How about I curse you with acid in the chest too, and you can see?" Padma snapped, kicking him out of the way as she bustled past. Kreacher skittered back and stared at Hermione for another minute as she deconstructed an unfamiliar curse signature on a witch whose bones were slowly dissolving inside her.

When Hermione looked up again, Kreacher had disappeared. When the witch was done, Hermione stumbled over and took another dose of pain relief, a strengthener, and Draught of Peace as she tried to force her hands to stop shaking.

Her lungs were beginning to rattle. She downed yet another cough suppressant and tried not to think about it. Padma hadn't indicated that anything about the injury was life-threatening.

She turned trying to see where she needed to go next. Most of the most complex injuries had been dealt with. She went to join Padma in healing the mid-level curses. "Do you want me to try to treat you now?" Padma asked, hesitantly touching Hermione's wrist. Hermione paused for a moment, considering, then shook her head. "Do you know why our backup healer isn't here? We summoned her two hours ago." Padma's face grew tense. "I don't know. I've sent five more patronuses. I haven't heard anything back." Hermione flicked her wand and healed an entrail expelling curse. She

felt almost numb beyond the searing pain in her chest.

“Then”—she said slowly—“we should wait a little longer. Until we know no one else is going to be brought in. Kingsley—Kingsley never came back. I should wait—in case he does. He was cursed.” “You should stop moving,” Padma said. “There are enough field healers here; we can manage all the treatment that remains. Go rest while you wait for Kingsley. I can stun you if you’d like.” “It’s more bearable if I have something else to concentrate on. Just—give me something that doesn’t require me to move my arms.” “Why don’t you close the cuts? All the ones over there have had the curses removed. That’s just a wrist movement.” Padma’s face was grey with worry and guilt as she stared at Hermione. Hermione nodded and turned to go. She was beginning to suspect that her injury was beyond Padma’s abilities. The lung and esophagus damage she could sense would require advanced healing magic and possibly two healers in order to coordinate the spellwork.

With Pomfrey sick—without their healer from St Mungo’s making an appearance— Hermione was the only person who knew it all.

Hermione would need to stay conscious while Padma removed Hermione’s sternum and ribs and repaired her lungs and throat in order to instruct her about how to do it. The mere thought had Hermione on the verge of breaking down.

She would probably black out from the pain and have to be rennervated— Repeatedly. Her hands started trembling violently. She closed her eyes and tried to breathe. Her chest spasmed and she gave a low gasp of pain.

She needed to make sure everyone else with serious injuries was healed so Padma could heal her uninterrupted. It would be worse if Padma had to take breaks. Maybe if Kingsley came back, he’d be able to get a healer.

Hermione opened her eyes and blinked dazedly. Kreacher had appeared once again and was standing in front of her. “Potter’s Mudblood is still working,” he said, looking her up and down. Hermione began to move around him. As she passed him, she felt his bony hand reach up and grab her wrist. She glanced down in surprise as she felt herself vanish. The squeeze of apparition on her damaged bones was mind-bending. She felt them fracturing as she reappeared. She gave an agonised cry and the bones ground together. The cry made her chest abruptly expand and contract, resulting in a sharp, searing pain as something snapped inside her chest. She screamed. She fell forward and felt herself caught by the shoulders. Everything hurt, and hurt, and hurt. Blinding, blinding pain. She was barely conscious of anything else. Every time she sobbed, she felt the bones grind together and break again inside her chest. She kept trying and failing to stop. “*Stupefy*.”

When she reawakened, she found herself immobile. Glancing around wildly, she found Draco staring down at her, pale and wide-eyed.

She stared at him.

“You...” She felt her jaw clench with anger and had to force the words out. “What did you do?” “You were injured. What do you think I did?” His voice was vibrating with intensity.

Hermione tried to look down and found she couldn’t move her neck. She was paralysed. She rolled her eyes down towards her chest. It was wrapped in bandages and an exoskeleton cast that supported her lungs while her sternum and ribs were regrowing. She could feel the sharp, needle-like pricking

of the Skele-Gro. It had been hours since she had been knocked out based on the regrowth she could sense. “I was going to be treated.” The sensation of having no upper ribs, sternum, or clavicles was horrifying. She couldn’t move her arms, torso, or neck. Her fingers barely managed to shift. “I was waiting for Kingsley.” “You nearly died.” Draco’s voice was shaking. “You were dying.”

“He might have come back. He might be there now—" she gasped and tried to make her head turn. “He was cursed. I have to go back.” “Shacklebolt is dead.”

Her eyes darted up, and she looked at him, horrified. “How do you know? What do you know?” she said in a voice that shook with outrage. “I killed him.” There was not a trace of regret in his face or eyes.

Hermione stared.

“You—you what?”

The sinking sensation inside made her feel as though a bottomless pit had opened in her stomach, and she was being dragged in. Collapsing into herself.

Somehow she had forgotten. That he’d killed Dumbledore; that he was a Death Eater; that she’d seen him kill dozens of people at a time without showing a hint of remorse; that his murderousness was why he was a valuable spy for them; that he brought them valuable, vital information because he continued to run successful raids and attacks for Voldemort. She knew it all. But she’d also forgotten it.

He’d killed Kingsley. He had probably been pleased to do it. She knew how much he hated Moody and Kingsley.

“You shouldn’t have brought me here,” she finally said. “You would be dead if I hadn’t. You were bitten by a vampire and took cough suppressing potion. Did you even know you were drowning in blood? You had minutes left when you arrived. Two casualty healers were barely enough to save you.”

Hermione blinked. She had forgotten about the vampire bite—it had happened so quickly. How had Padma overlooked it? Had she not even cast a diagnostic charm advanced enough to detect it?

She shoved the question aside.

“I didn’t know. There was a roomful of dying people. I was in line like all the rest of them. Pomfrey was sick. Our backup healer didn’t come. They needed me. Once someone started healing me, I wouldn’t have been able to move anymore, no matter what kind of advanced injuries came in. It took hours, didn’t it? Repairing everything? There wasn’t anyone available to do it. Do you have any idea how many people died today? How many are cursed so they’ll never recover? Just because you don’t care about them doesn’t mean they don’t matter.”

“You are mine!” Draco bared his teeth with rage. “I turned, and I saw you get cursed as you disappeared, and I didn’t even know if you were still alive. You said you wouldn’t leave the safe houses. You told me you’d be safe. You were in the middle of a massacre. Then—I learn that you were alive but not being treated.” He was so angry he looked ready to explode. She could feel the rage emanating from him.

“I even thought I was going overboard by having you kidnapped out of the safe house. I should have

known—I should have fucking known, you idiotic Gryffindor. You would have just let yourself die." "This is war, Draco. People die." Hermione said in a flat voice. "Given your personal death toll, you should know that better than anyone else. If you knew anything about me, you would know I'm not going to prioritise my survival over everyone else's."

Draco stared at her for several seconds. He was breathing through his teeth, his hands clenched into fists. "Well, you should." He was suddenly ice-cold. "I have warned you. If something happens to you, I will personally raze the entire Order. That isn't a threat. It is a promise. Consider your survival as much a necessity to the survival of the Resistance as Potter's. If you die, I will kill every last one of them. Given that the risk of their lives is apparently the only way to make you value your own."

Hermione stared up at him in state of shock that slowly twisted into rage. "How dare you? How dare you?"

If she could have moved, she would have cursed him, stabbed him, tried to beat him with her bare hands.

She wanted to weep as the full realisation of what his threat meant dawned on her. He was too dangerous. Too much of a risk to the Order. When she reported back to Moody, he would probably decide they had no choice but to kill Draco.

Whether Moody used his memories or hers, the result would be the same.

Tears welled up and streamed down from the corners of her eyes. She closed them so that she wouldn't have to look up at Draco.

The silence hung between them for a minute before she heard him sigh heavily. She felt the bed shift, and his fingers stroked her face, brushing away a lock of hair and then resting on her cheek. "You're thinking you'll have to kill me, aren't you?" he said. "That I'm too much of a liability now. If you go to Moody, he'll order it." His hand trailed down and rested lightly on her chest over the spot where her sternum was re-growing. The heat of it seeped gradually through the cast and into her skin. It made her breath catch. "And you'll do it. Won't you?"

Hermione opened her eyes and looked at him. He was seated on the edge of the bed, staring down at her. The rage had vanished from his eyes.

"You aren't leaving me any choice." she said in a shaking voice. "You know—you know I will not choose you over everyone else." He studied her. "You'll never forgive yourself."

Her jaw trembled. "No. I won't—" her voice broke. "But—it wouldn't be the first unforgivable thing I've done. I'm already a whore." His hand resting against her flinched. "Becoming a murderer will just be an extra line in the history books." "If you did, what would you do then?" "I'm sure you can imagine." She wanted to turn her head away, but, without her bones, her muscles couldn't function.

His hand withdrew. Its sudden absence tugged at something inside of her. She struggled not to sob. She hated this war. She had thought she could do anything. She thought there would be no limits to what she would be willing to do to save Harry—to save everyone. That she would be able to bear with the consequences for long enough to reach the end. Apparently Draco had become her limit. She didn't know how to endure the war on her own anymore. The thought of watching the light fade

from his eyes... A ragged wail tore itself from her throat. Suddenly Draco was over her, holding her in as much of an embrace as he could without injuring her. His face only a breath away from hers. “Just live, Hermione.” His voice was shaking. “That's all I am asking you to do for me.” Hermione gave a low sob. “I cannot promise that. You know I cannot promise that. And I cannot risk what you would do if I died.” He kissed her. His hands caressed her face, and his fingers tangled in her hair. She sobbed against his lips. “I’m sorry...” she kept saying again and again as she kissed him. “I’m sorry I did this to you.”

His lips were still against hers when he suddenly stiffened and hissed.

He wrenched himself away, gripping his left forearm until the knuckles of his right hand were white. “Fuck.”

He stood up and stared down at her. “I’m being summoned.”

She could see the calculation in his eyes. His jaw clenched, and he seemed to be wavering. An expression of despairing resignation flickered in his eyes.

“I can’t delay. I have to go. Topsy!”

A house-elf popped into the room. Hermione started slightly and glanced around, realising that she was not in a hotel room. “Am I—in Malfoy Manor?” Her voice shook with disbelief.

Draco gave a short nod, his expression brittle. “I had to bring you here. I can’t summon healers to Muggle London.” Draco grabbed a pile of robes. Hermione recognized them as his Death Eater uniform. He pulled them on rapidly. “I didn’t expect to leave you here alone.”

He leaned towards her, and his fingers ghosted along her wrist. “I swear, the wards won’t let anyone onto the estate. You’ll be safe. I’ll come back.”

His pupils were dilated as he stared down at her. She recognised the terror in his eyes.

“I’ll come back. No one can come here. You’ll be safe until I get back,” he said again. “Topsy, take care of Granger.”

Draco pulled his mask on and looked down at her for a split-second longer before he vanished from the room.

Hermione stared at the spot he’d disappeared from, trying to absorb the fact that she was lying paralysed, alone, in Malfoy Manor.

Hermione looked up at the ceiling and heard the house-elf, Topsy, fidget beside her. Hermione pressed her lips together for several seconds, trying to decide where to begin.

“Does Kreacher come here often?” Hermione finally asked, turning her eyes to look at Topsy.

Topsy stared back at Hermione with her enormous eyes and nodded. “Kreacher is coming most months to see the master. Kreacher serves the Noble House of Black. The master is being the last Black left.”

“I see.” Hermione was seething internally. “What does Kreacher do when he comes to see Draco?”

“He is telling the master about Granger and the Order of the Phoenix. And Kreacher is maintaining

Mistress Malfoy and Mistress Lestrange's grave sites. That is how the master was finding that Kreacher serves the House of Black still."

Hermione looked back up that ceiling and licked her lips. "How long has Draco known that?' "Topsy is not knowing, Topsy is thinking it was maybe for a year."

Hermione pressed her lips together as she reviewed the timeline of her interactions with Draco. "What kinds of things does Kreacher tell Draco about me and the Order of the Phoenix?"

Topsy shifted and her eyes dropped to the floor. "Topsy is not knowing. Master is mostly talking to Kreacher alone."

Hermione rolled her jaw. "How often does Draco come here?" "He is not coming here so much. Topsy and the elves is doing their best, but he is not liking to be here. He is only coming to meet Death Eaters and visit Mistress Malfoy's grave."

There was a silence as Hermione struggled to decide what to ask next.

"Do—do you know what happened to the healers Draco brought here to heal me?"

Topsy was silent.

"Did he kill them?" Hermione's voice rose sharply.

"Topsy is not knowing."

Hermione let out a quick gasp and fell silent for several minutes.

"Is the Miss Granger wanting anything?" Topsy stepped closer and stared at Hermione. "Topsy can be bringing food, or tea, or broths, or whatever the miss is needing."

"No. I don't need anything except for my bones to finish growing so I can move." Hermione wanted to explode with rage. She was going to kill Kreacher.

How had the Order overlooked such a horrific vulnerability? If Kreacher was willing to kidnap her out of Grimmauld Place at Draco's request, what else could Draco have used him for?

She lay there while her mind raced. She managed to twitch her fingers slightly and experimented with how much she could move.

Draco returned after an hour. His apparition was silent, but Hermione saw him immediately.

She could turn her head a bit. She studied him, looking for any sign that he might be injured. His expression was tense, but there was nothing that indicated he was hurt or had been crucio'd.

They stared at each other in silence.

"What happened to the healers you called here?" Hermione finally said. Her voice was ice-cold.

Draco's eyes flickered briefly. "Obliviated."

"Really?"

"Two dead healers could raise questions," Draco said with a shrug.

“So you would have killed them, but you didn’t because you decided it wasn’t worth the inconvenience?”

Draco’s eyes flashed. “Yes, Granger, for convenience which, as you know, I have so abundantly in my life with my two mutually exclusive masters.” Hermione felt the guilt catch in her throat. “I just—I don’t want you to kill people because of me.”

Draco gave a barking laugh and appeared amused as he stared down at her. “What exactly is it that you think I do with all my time? I kill people. I order other people to kill people. I train people to kill people. I sabotage and undermine people so that they will be killed, and I do it all because of you. Every word. Every spell. Because of you.”

Hermione flinched and gave a low gasp as though she’d been struck.

Draco’s vicious expression immediately vanished. “Granger, I didn’t—”

Hermione jerked her head slightly and tensed her jaw. “No. Don’t try to take it back. It’s true. What you said is entirely true. Everything you do is on my head too. Every spell.” Her voice wavered and faded.

“Don’t.” He sat on the edge of the bed and picked up her hand. “Don’t carry it. It’s not yours. Stop carrying this fucking war on your shoulders.”

“It is, though. I did this to you.” She squeezed his hand in hers. “Someone should regret it all. You don’t have the time or space to hesitate. It makes more sense for me to carry it. Maybe if I do—you’ll stop someday.”

Draco stilled and his mouth twitched. Instead of responding, he drew his wand and cast the diagnostic spell she’d taught him. They both studied it. There were still at least two hours of regrowth left.

Hermione looked up from his wand and stared at him.

“I’m getting rid of Kreacher when I go back. Assuming Moody hasn’t already killed him. You can have him, but he’s never setting foot in Grimmauld Place again.”

Draco’s jaw clenched, and he glanced away from her without a word.

“How long have you been using him to spy on the Order?”

“I found him tending my mother’s grave in April of last year.”

“April,” Hermione echoed. Then her eyes widened. “Is that why you hexed me? Because you read my notes?”

Draco said nothing in reply.

“I thought you did it because I healed you,” she said after a minute.

“I know.”

Her throat tightened. “Everytime I healed you after that, I thought—I thought you might hurt me again.” “I know.” His voice was hollow.

There was a long silence. Hermione pressed her lips together and drew a slow breath, feeling as though she might choke on her grief.

“I don’t know what to do. I can’t ignore a threat to the Order.” Draco sighed and looked down. “I was just angry.”

Hermione scoffed and jerked her chin. “You’re always angry. You can’t make threats like that. Especially not you. It was an accident. I was trying to heal Kingsley, and he apparated. I thought I’d take some of the injured back with me. My hands were full when I was cursed.”

“You were still working.” His voice was a carefully controlled. Clipped. She could hear the undercurrent of cold rage still in it.

“I wanted to,” she said firmly. “Padma didn’t know the spellwork to heal me. Pomfrey and she could have done it together, but Pomfrey was sick this week. Our other casualty healer never came. I think Padma panicked; I don’t think she used an advanced diagnostic charm to verify the injury. I could have asked her to stun me, but I wanted to keep working, and if she had—well, I might have died then. Although, hopefully she would have put monitor wards on me. I’m going to have quite a bit to say about healing practice when I get back. It was a lot of factors. You can’t reduce complex situations into a simplistic blame game. You can’t hold the Resistance hostage to control me.”

Draco gave a long sigh and stared across the room for a minute before he spoke. “If you die, Granger, I’m done. I won’t continue this. I’m tired.”

Hermione twisted her wrist enough to catch his hand. “Draco, don’t—”

He looked down at her. His expression was closed, but she could see the whole war in his eyes. “I mean it. I won’t kill them—but I will be done. You’re my terms of service. The contract is void if you die.”

She shook her head. “There is a life for you on the other side of the war; don’t—don’t reduce your world to me.”

He quirked an eyebrow, and his upper lip curled. “Yours hardly seems larger. Or are there post-war plans you’ve forgotten to mention?”

Hermione swallowed and looked away. “Do as I say, not as I do.”

Draco gave a low laugh, and they lapsed into a silence as empty as the future.

“You—you could become a healer,” she said after a minute.

A smile ghosted in the corner of his mouth. “I hadn’t considered that.”

Hermione gave a faint smile. “You should. If you went somewhere else, you could be a very good healer—although your bedside manner could use improvement.” “It would be something to balance out that death toll of mine,” he said without looking at her.

Her hold on his hand tightened. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. It’s not your fault.”

His eyes flickered away. “Maybe once. I believe I own it now.”

Hermione felt her stomach twist. “You are so much more than what the war has made you into.” Her

voice shook slightly.

He still didn’t look at her.

“You are,” she said, studying his face carefully. “Just like I am. There is more to both of us— it’s just—just waiting to get out.” Hermione traced her fingers along his. “Someday— someday—we’ll leave all this behind. The two of us—I think we could.”

His fingers entwined with hers tightened just a little.

She didn’t know what else to say. She felt her eyes droop.

Draco brushed a hand against her cheek. “Sleep. You still have a few hours before you can move. Once the bones are regrown, there are restoratives I’m supposed to give you. You’re not going anywhere for at least more twelve hours. I received precise instructions to ensure I’ll know if you try to leave or apparate prematurely.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Twelve hours is excessive.”

“It is the bare minimum, as you well know.”

Hermione’s mouth twitched and Draco snorted. “You are a manipulative little liar. Don’t expect me to trust you.”

Hermione’s eyes slid shut, and she suddenly gripped his hand tighter. “Don’t—leave me alone in this house.”

“I won’t.”

*Flashback 33*

**May 2003**

When Hermione woke, Draco was still beside her. He had a large stack of books he was cross-referencing. Hermione blinked and narrowed her eyes to read the titles and found he was researching Gringotts regulations and inheritance law.

“What are you doing?” she asked after a minute.

His eyes flicked up from the page he was on.

“Rodolphus Lestrange was found decoratively strung up in a number of pieces while traveling through Bulgaria.”

Hermione swallowed. Gabrielle. It had her fingerprints all over it. Gabrielle’s methods had grown increasingly ruthless and extreme in recent months.

“It was the reason for my summons,” Draco said as he snapped the book closed. “The Dark Lord is incensed by the audacity of the assassination and—curiously enough—intensely concerned about who will have access to the Lestrange vault now.”

Hermione froze, and her eyes widened. “Do you think—”

He gave a short nod. “The Lestranges would be an obvious choice to entrust with a horcrux. If my father was chosen, Bellatrix and her husband were equally likely. Old families with heirlooms and excellent security. Bellatrix transferred her inheritance as a Black into the Lestrange vault. Aside from Andromeda’s daughter, who’s currently a wanted criminal, I’m the last with Black blood. There are no more Lestranges unless a bastard crawls out of the woodwork. I believe that by blood and technicality, I may be able to access the vault.”

Hermione’s mind raced. “Bribe the goblins. They’re highly possessive of anything goblin-made. If you agree to give them some of the Black or Lestrange heirlooms that are goblin-made, they’ll cover up that you were ever there. That’s how we got access to some of the vaults.”

Draco’s eyes glittered. “Useful.”

He flicked his wand and summoned several vials from across the room. “Can you move?”

Hermione lifted her arm and tilted her chin downwards to look at her chest. At some point while she was asleep, Draco had banished the exoskeletal cast. The sheets were pulled carefully up to her regrown collarbones. Her fingers caught the fabric, but she hesitated and glanced up at him. “Is it bad?” He shrugged, but his eyes were fastened on her face. “It’s minor.”

Hermione tensed her jaw slightly as she pulled the sheet back and stared at her chest.

It looked as though a tiny bomb had exploded from her sternum. The scarring was concentrated in the dead centre of her chest and then spattered in tinier scars up toward her shoulders and down over

the tops of her breasts.

She could feel Draco's eyes on her although he didn't move. She blinked hard as she studied it. She swallowed slowly.

The scarring was quite minor considering the injury. She was hardly disfigured. It wouldn't have any lifelong consequences. With time, it would fade. She knew she could treat it so that it would fade.

She was very lucky. A few scars were nothing compared to the injuries other people in the Resistance would carry for life.

It was fine. She would just wear shirts with a high neckline.

She swallowed again and looked up at Draco, who was still watching her carefully. She forced a smile. "How—how many vials of Dittany did you use on me to manage this?" She dropped the sheet and pressed her hands against it.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Still not as many as you've used on me."

She gave a wry smile. "Your scars are prettier than mine."

He snorted audibly. "I had a better healer."

Hermione gave a low laugh, but it caught in her lungs. She tried to breathe but instead coughed violently until she spat several blood clots into her hand.

Draco was immediately beside her. He slid his hand behind her head, and there was a vial at her lips. "This is to clear your lungs."

Hermione's instinctive reaction was to pull away and inspect the potion in order to verify it, but she trusted Draco was paranoid enough for both of them. She parted her lips and swallowed it. The smothering, catching sensation in her lungs vanished.

Draco muttered a spell, and she felt the blood on her hand disappear.

Draco summoned several other potions. Hermione eyed them and mentally catalogued each one. Pain relief. Strengtheners. Potions for lung tissue. Potions to help the tendons and ligaments bond with the new bones. Some were somewhat redundant. Draco was exhaustively, obsessively thorough.

She swallowed every potion without a murmur, gagging down several. He kissed the top of her head. "Are you hungry?"

She snorted. "Not after eight potions. Although water would be appreciated. Do you have my wand? I think—I was holding it when I was apparated, wasn't I? I can't—entirely recall."

Draco pulled her wand from his robes and slipped it into her hand. She could feel the hesitation in his fingers.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realise that disapparation would cause your bones to shatter."

Hermione flinched at the memory. She looked down and forced herself to shrug. "Pressure. That's why I told you that you can't use displacement transport with brain or eye injuries. It can be similar

with damaged bones."

"I'm sorry." Hermione glanced up and gave him a small smile. "It's not your fault. It was a lot of bad luck."

He stiffened, and his expression froze before he scoffed under his breath. "It wasn't just bad luck. Does the Order realise how predictable they've become? The losses yesterday were almost entirely one-sided. It was a stunning success. It will be repeated."

There was a bitter rage in his voice.

Hermione stilled and then pressed her lips together, hesitating for a moment. "It was yours, wasn't it? The attack. You planned it."

Draco tensed, and there was a pause. He looked away from her, and she saw his jaw ripple.

"I have to maintain my position in order to do everything required. The Dark Lord knows there are spies in the army now. He's well aware that the Order has infiltrated somehow. Shacklebolt overplayed. Sussex and the various branches of the army are becoming sequestered. There are dozens of counter-espionage measures in place; maintaining rank is the only way to remain informed of them."

She slid a hand against his leg. "I'm not faulting you. I just hadn't realised it."

There was a long silence.

"I had no choice but to kill Shacklebolt," Draco finally said. "He was cursed, as you were aware. Weasley went on a rampage because some girl died. Shacklebolt got Potter and Weasley out, but he was finished." There was a beat. "Capture and interrogation would have been worse."

Hermione gave a slow nod without looking up.

The Death Eaters would have known the value of Kingsley Shacklebolt. They would have done everything in their power to tear out every piece of intelligence he possessed. It would have been a slow and horrific death.

It would have risked the Order. It would have risked the entire Resistance.

It would have risked Draco.

"Was it quick?"

"It was quick."

There was nothing else to say.

She ignored the weight in her chest and flicked her wand, casting a diagnostic on herself.

The bones had regrown well, but her lung tissue, tendons and ligaments were still delicate and resetting. Apparition would not be advisable for several more hours.

She looked up at Draco. "Do you need to work? I can help you research inheritance law."

"I've found what I need."

Hermione glanced around the room. It was sterile. Almost bare. The bed, a towering wardrobe, a desk, and a chair. “Is this a guest room?”

Draco’s mouth twisted in a brief grimace. “No. It’s mine. I don’t come here often.”

Hermione looked around more carefully.

It was as impersonal as his hotel rooms; she didn’t think she’d ever seen him with anything she could classify as personal possession. “I would have thought your bedroom would be green and silver.”

Draco gave an empty-sounding laugh.

She picked up his hand, entwining their fingers. “I’m sorry, Draco, that you had to come here because of me.”

His fingers tightened, gripping hers comfortingly. “I would have come for the books.”

Hermione lit up, and her eyes widened as she looked up at him. “Can I—can I see your library?”

Draco’s eyes glittered, and he chuckled. “I had wondered how long it would take you to ask.”

Hermione’s cheeks grew hot, and she dropped her eyes. “It’s just—I haven’t had access to many magical texts since returning from studying abroad. We brought some from Hogwarts, and the Black library is alright. I’ve read most of them now—there isn’t a place I can get books easily anymore.” “I’ll show you the library, Granger.”

She dressed, and Draco took her hand. They paused briefly at the door. Draco drew a sharp breath, as though he were bracing himself, before opening the door.

They stepped out into a long dark hallway. As they walked down it, several of the portraits muttered. Draco froze and then turned and stared at the pale, narrow-featured ancestor glaring at them.

“A word against her, and I will burn you to ashes. Pass on the warning.” Draco’s voice was deadly calm.

The ancestor turned green and nodded before ducking out of the portrait.

The library was enormous. Aisles and shelves of books with spiral staircases leading to a second story with paths running along more shelves.

“Draco…” Hermione felt as though there were stars in her eyes as she took it in. “This is—”

She hesitated. He hated the house. Being there with her had to feel like a nightmare.

”It’s nice library,” she finally said.

Draco gave a low laugh. “You’re allowed to like the library, Hermione. You don’t have to dislike the manor on my account.”

She stepped closer to a shelf and ran her eyes along all the spines. Her fingers hovered a breath away from the leather-bound tomes before she caught herself. “Can I touch them?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t show you books you couldn’t touch.” She shrugged. “Some libraries are

cursed against Muggle-borns."

Draco leaned against a shelf. "I don't think the Malfoys ever imagined a Muggle-born would be invited onto the estate." He gave her a wry smile. "What do you want to see?"

Hermione glanced around longingly before she spoke. "Soul theory, if you have any. They're usually a subsection in magical theory. I don't have much time."

Draco's expression flickered as he turned and led her through the aisles.

She lost track of time poring over the books. There were so many books there she'd never seen or even heard of. She raced through one book after another until her eyes burned, and she had to tilt her head back to remove the crick in it. As she looked up, she found Draco watching her.

His eyes were dark as he stared at her. Her skin prickled, and a shiver ran down her spine as she set down her book and met his eyes. He moved like water as he came towards her. He kissed her, and she drank him in. He slid his arms around her waist, and she drew her mouth back just enough to speak.

"We have to be careful. Everything is still a bit fragile."

He nodded and kissed her again.

He was careful. Slow and gentle. He touched her as though she were glass in his hands.

When he pulled her shirt off and looked down at her, she flinched, and her hands darted up to cover her sternum.

"They'll fade," she said quickly.

Suddenly she fully understood Ginny's tears over her scar. The injury on her chest seemed so much more prominent than the scars on her wrist were. She couldn't hide it; couldn't conceal it under the sheets, or behind her back, or off to the side so the scars wouldn't constantly be visible.

She didn't think they would affect how Draco regarded her—but maybe they would. The scarring was so present. Dropped right in the middle of her. Perhaps, after a while, being constantly revisited by the sight of them would cause things to change; eventually he'd want something that didn't have the war so overtly burned into it. Someday, if it was over, he might want something that wasn't such a constant reminder of the past.

The thought cut through her like a blade. She bit her lip and pressed her hands more firmly against her sternum.

"I'll treat them—so they'll fade more." She swallowed, and her fingers fluttered somewhat as she tried to cover them all and make them less—there.

Draco was still for a moment, then he caught her hands and pulled them away. He stared down, his silver eyes studying her intently until she could feel heat rising in her cheeks and ears and bleeding slowly down her neck.

"Do you see my scars that way? When you look at me, are they all you see?" he asked.

Hermione flinched. "No." "I don't see you that way either. You're mine." He let go of her hand, and

his left hand lightly traced along her throat and collarbones and then down her sternum to where the scarring was most concentrated. “You are. It doesn’t matter what happens to you. You will still be mine.” His head dipped slowly towards her, and he captured her lips with his as he said the last word.

She twisted her other hand free and tangled her fingers in his robes, drawing him closer. She kissed him and held onto him so tightly her hands trembled.

When she traced her fingers along his body and felt the scars along his torso and across his shoulders, her heart ached, and she kissed along them. She would wish them all away for his sake, but it had never occurred to her to dislike them for hers.

He was hers. She didn’t love him because she wanted to change him into something easier. He was hers.

He pushed into her, and she caught his face in her hands and almost spoke.

I love you.

It was on her tongue, but she hesitated and bit back the words.

There was a part of her that felt she might somehow doom them if she said it. If there were important things left unspoken, then perhaps tomorrow would come.

She kissed him instead.

I love you. She told him in the way she pressed her lips against his; in the manner her tongue slipped against the pulse point under his jaw; with the desperate way she tangled her fingers in his hair and the patterns she traced across his shoulders.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

She told him in the way she let go of herself and held onto him instead. I love you. I will always love you.

Eventually it was time to leave. There were no excuses to stay longer. The Order had been dealt a severe blow, and Hermione had to go face it.

She glanced at the library one more time before turning to leave.

“I’ll bring you back. Anytime you want,” Draco said as they stepped through the doors.

She paused and gave him a small smile. “No, you don’t need to.”

They walked back to a foyer they had passed through while walking to the library. It was an immaculate, empty room, but dark and cold for being near summer. Hermione looked around.

“Is it always this cold?”

Draco looked up. “I think it used to be warmer. I remember it being warmer. The ley lines are corrupted now. It affects the house. There are wards I could use to reduce it”—he shrugged —“there

have always been better things to do."

He slid a hand around her waist and side-along apparated her to Whitecroft.

Hermione stepped back and tightened her hold on her wand. Before she could apparate, Draco's hand darted out, and he captured her wrist. He pulled her back. "Hermione, please—," his voice broke off as he gripped her harder and hesitated. She looked up into his eyes.

She knew what he wanted to ask her.

He swallowed. "Don't get hurt again. Don't—"

She rose up on her toes and cut him off with her lips. He held her shoulders, and she could feel his temptation to apparate; to take her away and beg her to stay there.

She caught his face in her hands and gave him a slow kiss before pressing her face against his so their cheeks brushed.

"Be careful, Draco," she murmured against the corner of his mouth. "Be careful. Don't die."

His fingers around her wrist tightened and almost shook. Then he gave a low sigh and let go of her.

She kissed him again and forced herself to step away. Their eyes were locked on one another as she vanished.

Grimmauld Place was tense when Hermione walked in. There was a palpable sense of despair in the house. She stood in the foyer for several seconds, absorbing it. Now that she was no longer running interference with Draco's murderous rage, she had space to realise her own fury.

She headed up to the hospital ward, her jaw tense as she went to find Padma.

Padma burst into tears at the sight of her. "You're still alive. I turned around, and you'd vanished."

Padma hurried over and started casting diagnostics on Hermione.

Hermione shoved Padma's wand away. "I'm fine. I've recovered. If I were still in any danger, I wouldn't be standing here. Not that you'd know, since you apparently forgot to use a decent diagnostic spell yesterday. Did you actually diagnose by sight?"

Padma froze and paled. "I didn't? No. Wait—first I used the—" her voice cut off as her eyes widened with horror. "You're right. I'm sorry. I'm so used to you doing the advanced charms when I'm with you. I did a basic one—then—then I think I must have panicked."

Hermione stared and then shook her head in disbelief. "I had vampire venom in my system, Padma, and unfortunately I wasn't in a state of mind to recall it. That's such an easy thing to fix if you'd just used a better diagnostic. If I hadn't been taken to be healed, I probably would have died in the middle of the foyer."

Parma's face crumpled. "I don't have any excuse. I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't bring back a corpse," Hermione said, her voice shaking as she tried to rein in how venomously enraged she felt. Her neck and jaw were tense, straining with the effort of keeping her posture neutral. "There are things that should be rote. Someone is injured, you cast advanced diagnostic and ensure you know the exact extent of the injury. You don't ask them to tell you what

happened. You were a field healer for years; I can't believe I'm even having this conversation with you."

"I know. I know. I'm so sorry." Padma started crying harder.

Hermione's tongue twisted with all the frustration she wanted to pour out at Padma. She felt so angry she could feel her magic crackling in her fingertips.

She slid her hands behind her back and curled them slowly into tight fists as she forced herself to swallow her fury.

Hermione drew a sharp breath and looked away from Padma. "Where's Alastor?"

Padma sniffed and wiped her eyes. "War room. He's barely left since the Order held their debriefing. We lost Shacklebolt yesterday. Harry says Draco Malfoy killed him."

Hermione froze. "Harry saw Kingsley die?"

Padma nodded, her exhaustion visible across her face. "A lot—a lot of people died yesterday. I have the records mostly tallied for you. Ron's a mess. Lavender was killed too. They've been close, you know. Since he got mauled, they've been really serious. When he saw her die, he lost it. Harry tried to get him away, but—Ron was—apparently he killed the Death Eater that killed Lavender, and he broke Harry's wand arm when Harry tried to stop him. Kingsley got them both out, but as Harry was pulling Ron past the anti-apparition wards, he looked back. He said he saw Malfoy in front of Kingsley, and he knew it was Malfoy because Malfoy pulled off his mask and smiled before he used the Killing Curse."

Hermione swallowed and felt her legs threaten to give out. The hospital ward around her swam slightly.

Padma touched her on the arm. "Sorry, I should have told you more gently. I know you two were close."

Hermione blinked and felt dazed. "What?"

"Shacklebolt. You were friends, weren't you? You seemed to meet a lot."

"Oh—we—we—," she swallowed. "It was mostly hospital ward logistics."

What could she say about her relationship with Kingsley?

There was void in her chest where her emotions over his death should be. It was a blow, a horrific blow to the Order to lose him; she'd had sincere admiration for his skills as a strategist, for his capacity to make impossible choices. Yet the things he'd done—that he'd made her complicit in—his tacit allowance of torture, his disregard for her advice as a healer, his exploitation of Draco. He'd been a puppet master, who found strings he could manipulate and made the Order dance accordingly. He'd kept them alive through sheer genius, but Hermione found herself gasping with relief at being free of him. She didn't know what to feel over his death.

"I don't think Kingsley thought of anyone as his friend," she finally said, looking away from Padma.

"Well, Ron is pretty wrecked over it all. Over Lavender and then everything else on top of it." Hermione nodded absent-mindedly. She hadn't known Ron and Lavender had become serious.

She'd been so preoccupied with research and experimental potions, with worrying about Draco, with caring for Ginny; she'd barely paid attention to any of the relationships at Grimmauld Place. It hadn't seemed important. She didn't have the time or energy for everyone's relationships to be important to her.

Kingsley was dead. Lost in a battle that the Order should never have let themselves be lured into.

The war was coming down to the line, and the Order had nothing to show for it after six years. All they'd been doing for the last year was surviving. Without Kingsley's deft manipulation reining in Harry and the Resistance, she didn't know how they were going to manage even that.

Draco would be next.

She could feel it written into the future.

It had been in his eyes as he watched her apparate away.

Padma was reciting the list of the dead, the injuries—Hermione was only half-listening to the report.

"I need to speak to Moody. Make sure it's all written down, Padma; I'll verify the reports later."

Moody was sitting behind a pile of paperwork. His expression hardened when he saw Hermione. He cast a dozen privacy charms before he spoke.

"You're alive. I've been buried in reports, Patil said you'd been injured and then went missing, and that damned elf came in, sent to "inform me" that you'd been removed for your protection. How long has Malfoy been using it?"

Hermione swallowed and drew a deep breath. "Last April. That's what he told me."

Moody's mouth twisted. He was the most paranoid man she'd ever known. Discovering that Grimmauld Place had had a latent spy in residence immediately after losing Kingsley had to have been a shock.

"I thought it was bound to Potter." Hermione looked down at the floor. "House-elf magic is complicated. I haven't researched it extensively—most of the books only study it to exploit it. House-elves draw from the natural accumulation of magic. When old families have an estate that taps into the ley lines and utilises blood wards, it entwines the magic. They become highly attuned to the signature." Her throat tightened as she thought about the elves that had stayed in Hogwarts. McGonagall had offered to break the ritual bond they had with the castle; Hermione had begged them all to leave when the school evacuated. Some had agreed, but others had declined. Hogwarts and the magic there was their home. She didn't know if they were still alive inside Hogwarts prison, or if the Death Eaters had killed them all when the school was purged of 'uncooperative magic'.

She stifled the thought. "My theory is that whatever Sirius did to force the inheritance of Grimmauld Place to go to Harry split Kreacher's ties. Kreacher's bound to Grimmauld Place as a family seat, but he's also bound to the Black family's magical signature. Lucius handed the title and manor over to Draco after Narcissa's death. If Draco keyed the estate to himself with blood wards, then Kreacher belongs to Malfoy Manor as much as he belongs to Grimmauld Place; possibly more, since Harry has never used blood wards on Grimmauld Place to strengthen the ties. It was inevitable that as the Black signature on Grimmauld faded, Kreacher would be drawn somewhere that he could find it again. Instructions Draco gave him would have more influence than orders from Harry."

“I want it gone.”

“I was going to suggest it. His bond with Harry is so weak I think I can break it myself. He’ll lose the bond and connection to Grimmauld Place.”

“What will happen to it then?” Moody’s eye was spinning suspiciously.

“His ties will be solely to Malfoy Manor.”

Moody seemed to be considering. Finally he cleared his throat. “Fine. Gone by tonight, or I’ll be the one who deals with it.”

Hermione’s shoulders tensed as she gave a sharp nod. “I have something else to report. Rodolphus Lestrange was killed in Bulgaria. Draco was summoned about it. Due to Tom’s reaction to the news, Draco suspects that there may be a horcrux in the Lestrange vault.”

Moody started, looking at her sharply. “You told Malfoy about the horcruxes?” His voice was a growl.

Hermione met his eyes calmly. “I did.”

“You weren’t cleared to.”

She rolled her jaw. “He’s taken a Vow, Moody. He’s not going to betray the Order. We’ve known about the horcruxes for five years, and we failed to find a single one. Draco is more effective than anyone”—her voice sharpened,—“and you know it, because your list of demands for him has kept getting longer every week.”

Moody stood. “Watch your tone, Granger.”

Hermione did not watch her tone. Her voice dropped lower, and it vibrated with intensity as she met his eyes. “You have over-utilised him. If I were a lower calibre healer, he would have died ten times over in the last two months; I have told you this, I told Kingsley this, and you both ignored it. The fact that he will try to do anything you ask doesn’t mean you can keep demanding it until there’s nothing left of him to exploit. Tom knows we have spies in his army. It would be miraculous if he hadn’t noticed by now. He’s testing the Death Eaters’ loyalty. Kingsley pushed too far, and yesterday was the consequence of it.”

She leaned across the table towards Moody. “We lost Kingsley because he allowed the Order walk into a trap for the sake of solidarity. I said the Resistance shouldn’t go.” She felt so angry her chest ached, as though her sternum were going to fracture again. “I said we shouldn’t go, and I was told that putting the Resistance first was the same as saying ‘wizards first’ and that’s only a step short of ‘Purebloods first,’ and then I was reminded that every human life is worth the same and worth saving; as though I’m not the one trying to save them.” She fought to breathe through her seething rage and swallowed bitterly. “Well, they know we’ll walk into death traps on principle now, so how many worthy lives do you imagine yesterday’s heroism will cost us in the long run?”

She slammed her occlumency walls more firmly into place and released a short breath.

She gripped the edge of the table, and her mouth twitched as she met Moody’s gaze. “I’m done watching my tone.”

She straightened and glanced around the room. “I’m the only person you’ve got in Grimmauld Place. I have been an obedient foot soldier. I have done the unconscionable for the Order, and I don’t know what we have to show for it.” Her mouth twisted, and her chest tightened. “We’re no closer to winning than we were a year ago. I have followed orders without a word of complaint. I would accept it if it was just me—because at this point, what good would stopping do? Or if I believed we’d eventually win the war because of it. But I don’t believe that. I don’t even think you believe that.”

She met Moody’s gaze and gave a thin smile. “If you have a better ally left in the Order, by all means, show me.”

Moody said nothing.

She released a sharp breath. “Draco and I will try to find the horcrux. I need access to the sword of Gryffindor. I can—” her throat tightened, and she dropped her eyes down to the desk, “—help coordinate and manage the reconnaissance team, since they’re all acquainted with me, and I can take care of the food distribution to the safe houses; it can be done along with the potion distribution I’m already responsible for.” She studied the files on the table between them. “Let me know what else you need.” Chapter End Notes

“I was told that putting the Resistance first was the same as saying ‘wizards first’ and that’s only a step short of ‘Purebloods first,’ and then I was reminded that every human life is worth the same and worth saving,” is a paraphrased excerpt from Chapter 22 of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.

*Flashback 34*

**June 2003**

Draco brought Hufflepuff's Cup to Hermione in less than a week.

She recognized it instantly from the pictures she'd seen researching. "You found it."

He looked down at the ornate goblet in his hand. "I would have had it yesterday, but I'm going through the legal channels for vault access as well. It will be transferred to my name within the next month once the Ministry paperwork confirming Rodolphus' death goes through. Traditionally the process should take months, but it's being accelerated out of concern that Andromeda's daughter might try to claim it."

Hermione studied him carefully. "Is there any record that you've been there?"

Draco gave a thin, closed smile. "None at all."

Hermione's throat tightened. She didn't look at Draco as she swallowed and gave a sharp nod.

They couldn't afford any loose ends—but every death felt like an additional noose around her neck. She shoved the thought away.

She opened her satchel and pulled out the sword of Gryffindor.

Draco raised an eyebrow and studied it. "Do you usually carry a sword?"

Hermione stared down at the blade in her hands. "I got it last week. I knew you'd be efficient. I figured I should come prepared."

Draco's eyes glittered. "How do we do this?"

Hermione gnawed at her lower lip. "I'm not sure. We should probably cast a barrier spell, to try to contain any potential backlash. Then, I suppose I stab it." She gave him a small smile. "I've never stabbed a cup."

"I'll do it." He extended his hand to take the sword.

Hermione shook her head and stepped back, pulling the sword closer to herself. "No. I need to. There's very little information on horcruxes in books. I need to analyse and observe it when it's destroyed."

Draco's expression hardened, and he stepped towards her; his eyes were flint-like. "No, you don't. You said Dumbledore was cursed destroying the ring. Give it to me, Granger." Hermione gripped the hilt more tightly and jutted her chin out as he closed in on her.

"Dumbledore was cursed because, for some reason, he put the ring on. I'm not going to wear it, I'm going to analyse it and then stab it. Harry stabbed the journal without any problem."

Draco's hand closed around hers. "You're the healer. If it tries to kill us, you have a better chance of saving me than I have of saving you." She didn't loosen her hold. She looked steadily up at him. "I also specialise in analysing and deconstructing Dark Magic."

He stared down at her, his expression a mask. Her heart started pounding, and she tightened her hold on the sword, half-expecting him to try to wrench it out of her hands.

"Draco, let me do my job."

His expression wavered, and he let go of her hand. "Tell me what to do if something goes wrong."

Hermione unclasped the bracelet on her wrist and held it out to him.

"This charm here," she pointed at a small cauldron, "if you activate it, it sends my location to Severus."

Draco's expression flickered, and his mouth twisted into contempt. "Snape is a double agent. I thought the Order had stopped trusting him years ago."

"He's a triple agent. Reducing his official clearance level within the Order is a cover. He has the same clearance I do. He's known about you since the beginning. He's the one who convinced Moody and Kingsley that your offer was probably legitimate."

Draco's expression was disbelieving.

Hermione gave a small sigh. "You don't need to trust him, but if I'm dying and not conscious to heal myself, he'd probably be the only person who could do anything. He's the one who contained the curse on Dumbledore."

Draco's expression was mutinous, and he refused to touch the bracelet she was offering him.

The corner of her mouth twitched, and she lowered her hand. "You asked what to do, and I'm telling you. If something goes wrong, he's the one to call. Whether you choose to use it or not is up to you."

The muscles in Draco's jaw rippled, and he snatched the bracelet from her fingers.

She set up a barrier around herself and built a web of analytical magic around the Cup. Horcruxes were such a taboo there was no record of the magic ever being analysed. Hermione understood the fundamentals, based on theory, but actually dealing with a suspended piece of mangled soul was a level of Dark Magic she had never encountered in any form. She ignored the charmwork crafted by Helga Hufflepuff when the Cup was created and focused on the Dark Magic. The Cup was surprisingly unprotected. Voldemort must have assumed that the Lestrange vault had sufficient safety measures on its own.

The soul fragment had interlaced and entwined itself with the other magic of the Cup. Poisonous and malevolent, it seemed to sense it was being disturbed. Hermione worked quickly; if she had enough information on Voldemort's magical signature, they might be able to use it to find other horcruxes.

Her eyes darted up to Draco. He was still as a statue as he watched her, as though he were not even breathing.

She wrote everything down on a scroll and picked up the sword of Gryffindor. It was a perfectly balanced sword, but it felt unwieldy compared to a knife. She drew a deep breath and drove the

blade into the centre of the Cup, splitting it in half. There was an unnerving moment of stillness. Hermione snatched up her wand.

The air shifted and moved around her.

There was a long drawn out scream, and the soul fragment rose up from the Cup like a black wraith with scarlet eyes. For a second it seemed poised to strike. It appeared to detect Hermione and moved sharply towards her. Then it wavered and dissolved into thin air.

Nothing.

Hermione gave a small gasp and stood clutching her wand, her chest jerking unevenly as she tried to breathe.

She performed a quick spell to confirm the soul fragment was gone.

“It’s done,” she finally said, flicking her wand and removing all the wards around her. “That —wasn’t too bad. I thought it might be a lot worse than that.”

She looked up and found Draco was only inches away from her. He dragged her into his arms and gripped her until she was crushed against his chest. “Never—please, not ever again.”

She wanted to say no, but he was so tense he was nearly shaking. She found herself nodding slowly and saying, “Alright. I won’t.”

Harry was like a lost lamb in Grimmauld Place. Ron had been placed on leave. He went to stay with his mother, while he grieved over Lavender and tried to come to terms with the guilt he felt over Kingsley’s death.

Hermione found Harry standing listlessly near Ginny’s door more often than not. She opened the door after a visit with Ginny and found him standing blank-eyed outside the door. He had a black eye and cut lip, and his knuckles were split so badly there was still blood running down his fingers and dripping onto the floor.

His eyes brightened, and he seemed to come back to himself when he saw Hermione. “Is she alright? Is she doing any better? Do you think she’s—do you think I’d be able to see her soon?”

Hermione stared at him, her stomach dropping sharply at his appearance. Harry was worryingly fragile. She had tried several times to convince Ginny to come clean and tell Harry she was pregnant, but Ginny was adamant that telling him would make things worse. Hermione had appealed to Moody; to her disappointment, he had sided with Ginny. Harry was in no condition to handle any additional stress, and the Order could not handle the breakdown of trust if the truth came out at such a critical point. Things were too precarious.

Hermione swallowed her guilt while performing all her pantomimed protection and sterilisation charms on herself.

Ginny had a bump that was beginning to require precautionary glamours, if only to fool Dobby, who Harry regularly spoke with.

The baby was a boy. Ginny already referred to him as James.

“She’s the same, Harry. I’m sorry.” His expression fell. He gave a listless nod and started turning to

go.

He was deathly pale, and the eye that wasn't purple and yellow was sunken.

She reached out to stop him and touched his face lightly. "You're fighting again? When did you last sleep?"

He jerked. "A—a couple days ago. For a few hours."

She cast a diagnostic charm on him; he had several fractures in his hands and his eye socket, and his torso was covered in bruises.

She took him gently by the arm and led him down the hallway toward the hospital ward. "Is it nightmares again? I can teach you a few more occlumency techniques, it might help. Come on, let me fix you up and get you some Dreamless Sleep."

Harry gave a short, hysterical laugh. "I wish I had nightmares."

Hermione paused and looked at him. "What do you mean?"

Harry's face twitched. "It's not nightmares, Hermione. It hasn't been nightmares in years. It's him. When I'm asleep, I'm him. I torture people and kill them, and I feel how he feels when he does it. I don't even have to be asleep for it to happen, it's just worse when I am." Harry was trembling with exhaustion. "Last time I fell asleep, he was trying new curses and then he drank a goblet of unicorn blood, and when I woke up, I could taste it. I haven't—I haven't been able to eat—"

"Harry, you didn't tell me things had gotten so bad. You should have told me."

He twitched. "What—are we talking again?" His expression was wounded as he stared at her.

Hermione's hand dropped away, and she looked back at him. "Tell me what happens."

He shook his head, his eyes unfocused. "It's not so bad when I have something to focus on. When I'm on a mission—when I'm with Ron and Gin—when I'm remembering why I'm doing all this, I can keep him out. But—it's like there's a place in my mind that's an open door, and sometimes I step through it when I'm distracted. When I wake up—I don't always know who I'm waking up as."

Hermione hurriedly pulled out several restorative potions. "Take these. I don't care how awful they taste, you're malnourished."

Harry gagged two down and then vomited them both up again. Hermione banished the mess and pulled out a stomach settler and handed it to him more gently.

"Try this one. If you haven't eaten in a few days, it can help. Sip it slowly."

"Hermione—," he said between sips as she muttered spells and spread bruise paste across his face. "I think there's something wrong with me."

Hermione's fingers twitched, and she shook her head sharply. "Harry—I really think practicing occlumency could help with this. I can help you with it. I've read several books now, I think I can do it more gently than Severus did; maybe it would go better."

She cast another more complex diagnostic on him. He was underweight. He was chronically sleep deprived. He was worryingly frail. He was vibrating with magic in a way that he had for as long as

she had known him. His magical signature was blurry and indistinct. It was the way Harry was; how he'd always been, Pomfrey had told her that when Hermione asked during her early years of training.

Harry pressed his hand against his scar and looked away. "Occlumency doesn't help."

Hermione gave a frustrated sigh. "I know separating from your emotions can be difficult at first, but I think, if you try, it could—"

"It makes it worse," Harry said in a hard voice. "Every time I try, it makes it even worse."

Hermione swallowed and turned away to summon new restorative potions, her jaw tense. She handed the vials over wordlessly. Harry managed to keep them down.

She pulled out a vial of Dreamless Sleep without looking at him. "Well, we can at least agree that undisturbed sleep will help." He gave a small nod and downed the potion.

With all the restoratives in his system, it took longer for the potion to take effect. He sat for a minute before his head lolled, and he dropped it against her shoulder.

Hermione hesitated, and then wrapped her arms around him, and hugged him tightly. "I'm sure you'll feel better after you sleep."

"I miss Gin."

Her throat caught, and she rested her head on his. "I know. I'm sorry."

Harry gave a low sob under his breath. "When I was with her, it seemed like everything was easier for a while."

Her hands trembled. "I'm sorry, Harry."

She held him while he drifted off. Then she tucked him carefully under a blanket and went to speak with Alastor.

Fleur was in the war room when Hermione reached the doorway.

"I 'ave not 'eard from Gabrielle so often lately. She 'as always sent word on ze wireless so I would not worry. A little joke or phrase so I would know she is alright. But there 'as been almost nothing. You must 'ave some way to contact 'er. She is my baby sister, I am responsible for 'er."

Moody's mouth twitched, and his eye spun sharply. "Your sister has always worked on her own terms. I'll see what I can do."

Fleur gave a stiff nod. "Thank you. Bill and I 'ave replaced the wards on all ze safe 'ouses once again, and we are renewing ze wards on ze cave. 'Owever, there are limits to 'ow much more we can do. We are nearly at ze capacity. We need a secondary location or ze magic quantities may compromise security."

Moody gave a low sigh and nodded, his eye rolling suspiciously downward. He seemed to have aged a decade in the two weeks since Kingsley's death. "I'll have a team start scouting for new locations. We'll need new guards for it. You and Bill will need to train them."

Fleur nodded again and departed. Hermione studied Fleur's face as they passed each other. Fleur

was a lovely, ethereal figure among an army that was increasingly grey and despairing, but the strain of the war was visible in her eyes. Fleur and Bill mirrored each other in their quiet guilt.

Fleur's parents had been early casualties when the war reached France. Gabrielle had survived by being at school rather than at home, but eventually the war had razed Beauxbatons too. Few members of the French Resistance had survived. Hermione suspected Gabrielle's veela allure had been what spared her. The way Gabrielle had continued to weaponise it seemed like a form of guilt-stricken restitution and revenge. Gabrielle's methods had grown more vicious and vindictive over time. Flamboyant. Borderline careless. Hermione had started taking calming draught before even heading to the beach in Cornwall.

Hermione wasn't sure how much of Gabrielle's activity Fleur was aware of, but she imagined Fleur knew enough and suspected more about the little sister who was always so eager for her next mission.

Gabrielle's eyes were colder and older than even Draco's.

Hermione stared at Moody in silence for several seconds after Fleur left. He gave a low sigh and started casting privacy charms.

"I'm worried about Harry," Hermione said when Moody sat back. "He seems like he's at the edge of a precipice. We need to get into Hogwarts."

"We're trying to. Remus has a team there now."

"I think—," she hesitated and crossed her arms. "I've been—dabbling in a few things lately. I think I've found a way to take down the wards around the castle. I've been analysing all the reports brought back. There's—a bomb—a bomb I think I can make. It can be placed under temporary stasis. We can have Draco or Severus plant it without risking their covers. I can delay the detonation for up to three days."

Moody stared at her. "You think?"

Hermione's throat tightened, but she lifted her chin. "Well, I've never made one before. When I mentioned the idea a few years ago, I was told it was unethical, regardless of how targeted the blast could be on a Death Eater location. The Order decided we could only use explosives on empty buildings. However, this one wouldn't have much collateral. The blast would be targeted at the magic surrounding the castle. So—if it's framed carefully, the Order shouldn't find it unethical in this case."

"What materials would it require?"

She could see Moody calculating a budget for her proposal.

She swallowed. "I—already have them."

Moody's expression stiffened. His eye spun and locked on her. "This is Malfoy's idea then. He's offering to supply you?"

Hermione pushed her chin up. "No. This is my research exclusively. I have the materials because the Resistance brought them in last year when the curse division's lab was raided. There was a large quantity of materials brought back that—" her mouth twitched. "They aren't used in traditional

forms of potion making. I have more than everything I'd need."

Moody gave her a long look. "You've never reported it." She raised her eyebrows. "I was busy at the time; all I could do was store them until I had time to catalogue it. It wasn't until July that I knew exactly what I was handling." She shrugged. "My supplies were never an inventory I was asked to report."

Alastor's face twitched with irritation, but he seemed to be seriously considering the proposal.

He ran his thumb along the handle of his wand. "Using a bomb to get into Hogwarts would result in an all-out battle."

"I know." Her chest felt constricted, and she had to force herself to breathe. "I was thinking, if it's played as a rescue, we could use a larger attack as a diversion while a smaller group could go into the castle. The school should still recognise Minerva; it might cooperate with us."

Moody gave a slow nod, looking deep in thought.

Hermione left without a word.

Alone in her potion cabinet, she leaned over and rested her head on the worktop. Her hands were shaking from stress and exhaustion. Voldemort felt like an incoming tide. The rock the Resistance had lashed itself to was crumbling beneath them.

No matter what she did, it was never enough to enable them to get ahead.

Draco had been abroad for nearly a week, inspecting the puppet governments Voldemort had set up across Europe. It was an assignment Voldemort tended to give out on whim.

Rodolphus Lestrange had been on such a mission when he'd been intercepted by Gabrielle.

Draco left a note in the shack to explain his absence. It had been so abruptly assigned that a note was all he could manage.

Since the day she had read it, Hermione had nightmares of arriving at the beach in Cornwall and discovering Draco sitting mangled in that small room in the cave. Nightmares of him never returning at all, and receiving word from Severus that he'd been been found dismembered in some foreign city.

She had never even thought to warn him about Gabrielle.

When her ring burned again for the first time in days, she ran out of Grimmauld Place to apparate and flung herself through the door of the shack.

He was already standing in the middle of the room, still wearing his Death Eater robes.

"You're back," she said, so relieved she felt her knees might give out. He was there, he was still alive, he appeared uninjured.

She reached towards him. Her hands were shaking as she grasped his robes and touched his face. "Are you alright?" he asked.

She gave a short nod as she rested her head against his chest. "What's wrong?"

She closed her eyes for several seconds and listened to his heart, just feeling him: alive.

“Nothing. I’m just so tired. I feel like I forgot to breathe until now.”

He was still for a moment before he gave a low sigh. His hands hesitated before he rested them on her shoulders.

Her stomach dropped, and she opened her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

Draco was silent. His fingers twitched. “My father—he’s being recalled to Britain.”

Hermione’s heart stalled as she looked up at him.

His expression was closed. Resigned. “He’ll expect my company when we’re both off duty.”

“Oh.”

She didn’t know what else to say. She stared up at him, and he looked away from her, but his hands remained on her shoulders.

She grasped for words. “Of course, you should spend time with your father.”

He gave a sharp laugh.

“Hardly. My father, he—” Draco hesitated, and his gaze dropped to the floor. There was a trace of boyishness in his tone. “—well, he blamed me for my mother’s fragile health.” His expression was closed, but his eyes flickered. “He always said he expected me to be an exceptional heir to make up for—nearly killing her.”

“Draco—”

He jerked slightly and cleared his throat, his tone becoming clipped again. “Suffice to say, I’ll have little availability—to anyone—for the foreseeable future. It may take me longer to complete assignments. If you can inform Moody, I hope he’ll take it into account.”

Not available. Not to the Order. Not her.

She felt so tired she could barely stand, but she nodded and drew herself up. “Of course. Don’t worry. I’m sorry. You’ll be back in the manor then, won’t you?”

He gave a short nod.

She caught his hands and ran her fingers along them, checking for any tremors. She needed to make sure he was alright. If she didn’t know when she’d see him again, she had to know he was alright. “When will he arrive?” “Tomorrow or the day after. I found out when I reported back.” His voice was dull.

Her mouth twitched, and she focused on his hands. “I’m sorry. Maybe—it won’t be for long.”

“It’s possible. He doesn’t like to stay in Britain.”

He drew a sharp breath, and his jaw twitched as he watched her check his fingers, again and again. “I suspect there’s something coming. Tell Moody. It was mentioned to me that the Dark Lord has gone to Sussex personally several times while I was gone. Whatever it is he’s doing, he isn’t confiding to anyone currently, except perhaps Dolohov. It—could be related to my father’s

unexpected return."

Hermione nodded. "I'll tell Moody. I think—the Order is preparing to make a move on Hogwarts."

"It would be a relief if they did something. Things have been suspiciously quiet lately." There was an unspoken question in his tone.

Hermione avoided his eyes. "Losing Kingsley was a blow. It's affected morale." She kept looking at his hands.

"They have been suspiciously quiet for me too. Are there concerns about my morale?" Draco's tone was light but with a razor edge hidden in it.

Hermione looked up. "No. I haven't told Moody about your threat, if that's what you're asking."

Draco's eyes flickered. She saw him doubt her.

The corner of her mouth twitched, and she let go of his hand and stepped back.

"After Kingsley died, I told Moody that he and Kingsley had been over-utilising you just to buy time without any broader strategy, and I wasn't going to stand by and watch it anymore." She shrugged. "I'm more crucial now—without Kingsley, Moody needs my support to maintain all the classified aspects within the Order." She gave him a small smile. "I can protect you now."

Draco's lips pressed together into a hard, flat line, and his expression grew cold and closed.

"I don't want you inserting yourself to protect me, Granger." His tone was like ice.

She stiffened and there was a sharp stab of hurt that laced through her. "Why not? Is protection exclusively your right? Am I supposed to just sit quietly in the safe houses while you win the war for me?" She jerked her chin up. "I'm not running raids. I'm still carefully cag—"

Draco flinched before she could cut herself off.

She dropped her head and drew a sharp breath, curling her fingers into a fist as she looked away from him. "I'm sorry. That—I didn't mean that. I don't see it that way." Lie.

She sighed and looked away from him. "I'm not leaving the safe houses. I'm just coordinating more of the classified details within the Order, which means I have more leverage now than I did before. That's all. I'm not—endangering myself."

She stopped speaking and stared at Draco. His expression was guarded.

The air hung around them, cold; as though their ghosts surrounded them. They were both drenched in the dead.

The war was like an abyss that wanted everything and was never satisfied. There was always more required. Another life. An additional measure of blood. Be better. Smarter. More ruthless. Quicker. More cunning. Accept a second portion of pain.

It was never enough. Hermione had gone to Eleos and Panacea. She'd lain herself prostrate at the feet of Athena. She'd built prayer towers. She'd sacrificed almost every piece of herself that she had to offer.

Never enough.

Draco had walked straight to the altar of Ares.

Never enough.

Nothing was ever enough. The war always wanted more.

*'If you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back at you.'*

What will you give? What will you give to win?

Hermione swallowed. "Draco—what do you expect me to do?"

He gave a sigh that sounded like a hiss. "I don't want you in this fucking war." The rage in his voice was raw. "All I do is worry about what will happen to you if I fail to meet all requirements."

She drew a sharp breath and stepped towards him, reaching for his hand. "The Order is not like the Death Eaters. Draco—"

His expression turned vicious before she could touch him.

"I am aware of the difference." He sneered. "Do you imagine it's somehow more reassuring to know you'd just volunteer?"

Hermione stepped back and glared at him, her shoulders rigid. "I am not a possession you can put away somewhere, Draco. I've spent years training in order to contribute to the Resistance. You can't ask me to stop or leave because it worries you. You agreed—you swore you wouldn't interfere with my aid to the Order. You can't try to guilt me into passivity either." He glared at her. "You have no idea what would happen if you're caught. If—"

"I do know," she snapped, cutting him off. Her throat was tight, and her chest felt compressed until she could barely breathe. "What do you think I do with all *my* time? I heal the people you Death Eaters don't manage to kill. That's almost all I've done for years. I cared for the victims from the last curse division until they died. And they all died." She tried to swallow. "Every—last—one of them—died. I'm so aware of the risks I think sometimes I might go mad from knowing them. Don't you dare—don't you dare try to treat me as naive. I know as well as you. Why do you think I try so hard?" Her voice broke slightly.

Draco's expression remained cold.

Hermione turned away. She felt so drained she wanted to sink into a corner so she wouldn't have to keep standing. She'd been so worried waiting for him to return to England. She'd reached her limit. She could feel her occlumency walls wavering; like a dam, her exhaustion threatened to break apart.

You're losing. You're losing. You haven't saved anyone. Draco. Harry. Ron. Ginny. The Order. The Resistance.

You want too much.

Her shoulders shook. She wanted to go back to her potion cabinet and find something that would make the war stop feeling like death by a thousand cuts.

She pressed her lips together, and her jaw trembled. "I think I need to go. I'm too tired to have this

argument tonight."

She wanted to just vanish. She was so tired of begging him not to die. She swallowed. Even her saliva tasted bitter. "I'll report to Moody about your father. Do you need me to heal you at all?"

Draco's hand shot out, and he gripped her wrist. "Don't. Don't go. I don't know when I'll be able to call you again."

She wavered. "Draco—I'm so tired—I don't want to fight—"

He pulled her closer. "Just stay with me. Just stay."

She gave a small nod and dropped her head against his chest. He slid an arm around her waist and apparated. They reappeared in his suite in the Savoy.

He laid her on the bed and pulled off her shoes. He sat on the edge, running his fingers along her arm until she was half-asleep.

He stood. "I need to shower and eat. I'll come back."

Hermione reached out and caught his hand. "I was afraid you'd die abroad, and all I'd have was your note." Her voice was thick. "You're always in danger, and I can never ask you to stop." He ran his thumb across the back of her hand. "I would if I could. You know that. I'd run with you and never look back."

"I know—" Her voice broke. She was too tired to keep her emotions at bay. She gave a low sob. "Don't die, Draco. You can't leave me behind."

He sank back down onto the bed beside her and didn't leave until she stopped crying and fell asleep.

When the bed shifted, she woke to find him on the far side of the bed, his hair slightly damp. It had been hours since they'd arrived; more sleep than she'd had since he'd left.

She shifted across the bed and into his arms, resting her forehead against his bare chest, tracing her fingers along his torso until he caught her hand and then rolled her under him. He studied her eyes but didn't move again until she lifted her head and kissed him.

His hand was on her throat, his thumb sliding up to nestle under her jaw as his tongue played against hers. Gradual. Committing him to memory. She never thought she could know a person with such slow intimacy. She laced her fingers through his hair and closed her eyes, focusing on the sensation of him.

She knew how he would press his lips against the pulse point of her throat, the ways he would push her body down beneath him. The sensation of his hands on her thighs and his teeth grazing across her skin.

When he moved inside her, his hands were locked around her wrists. She arched and met his hips. She felt his breath whisper across her skin.

"Mine. You're mine," he said as he kissed along her jaw. "Always."

Chapter End Notes

"Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if

you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.” Friedrich Nietzsche

*Flashback 35*

**June 2003** Hermione completed the bomb in two weeks. The final product was silver, ovoid with a faint luminescent shimmer, slightly smaller than a crystal ball, and freezing cold to touch.

The timing of the construction had been precise. When it was finished, she sent immediate word to Severus. He was due to visit Hogwarts that afternoon, to select new prisoners for use at Sussex.

“It’s only visible to those who know to look for it,” she said, handing it carefully over. “It’s set to activate at exactly noon on July 1st. There are some cushioning charms where I could risk them, but—don’t drop it.”

Severus had been surveying it carefully until her warning.

He looked up and sneered at her. “Thank you, Miss Granger, without your warning it would never have occurred to me to be cautious with a bomb.”

Hermione didn’t blink. “Would you rather I not mention it’s delicate?” She arched her eyebrows. “It’s designed to target the magic keeping us out of Hogwarts, so the higher you can get it, the better. The Astronomy tower would be ideal. It has some combustive power, but it’s primarily designed to break the wards, the lower it is at detonation, the less impact it will have. At least—well, it’s based entirely on arithmancy—I couldn’t actually test it.”

“I’m overcome with confidence,” Severus said, looking down at it again.

Hermione was so nervous her chest felt fractured. Lately it was a constant, grinding pain until she could barely breathe.

“I was unaware you had added bomb-making to your repertoire,” Severus said after a minute.

Hermione pulled off a heavy dragonhide apron and gloves and looked down at her hands, wincing. Her skin was speckled with burns, and several fingertips were green and withered; she’d have to carve off the remaining tissue and regrow it. Protective clothing and wards had limited effect when working with materials specifically chosen for their ability to destroy protection.

She rubbed her fingers together and watched as the skin cracked and fell off, leaving the bones exposed in places.

She grimaced and carefully wrapped bandages infused with essence of Dittany around her hands. “I started after we heard about the Albanian hospital—just the theory. I didn’t understand the reports, and I felt guilty that maybe it was partly my fault that the hospital had been targeted. I thought I should at least know what happened to everyone there. Then—after the raid on the labs of the curse division—I had everything, but it wasn’t even worth trying to propose that the Order use a bomb.”

She shrugged and started packing up her materials into all their carefully sealed and cushioned boxes and containers while Severus watched. They were in an abandoned barn in the countryside that the Order had sectioned off for Hermione to work in. Initially, there had only been half-hearted

objections made when the idea of using a bomb was proposed, but in the end the Order had agreed. No one had a better idea, and after half a year, and dozens of casualties from the attempts, there was a sense of raw desperation in everyone. Hermione gingerly placed a flask, still half-full of shimmering, silver liquid, into a warded box and sealed it with several protective spells. “When Bill brought his analysis of the wards on Hogwarts last month, I realised that there was a chance I could combine charmwork and arithmancy with the traditional use of potions and alchemy for explosives. I was rereading Dumbledore’s collaboration with Flamel on the uses of dragon’s blood and had the idea that it would react with silver nitrate dissolved in unicorn blood powerfully enough to dissolve the wards. The main challenge was finding a way to suspend it in something that could penetrate and adhere to the magic, so I used manticore venom to emulsify it. The detonation is primarily intended to create a blast radius large enough to destabilise and collapse the wards when the solvent hits it. I ran the numbers dozens of times before I brought the proposal to Moody; I’m almost positive I’ve calculated it all correctly.”

She caught herself rambling and stopped, looking up at Severus.

As he studied her, his eyes glittered. Then his mouth pursed, and he stared back down at the bomb between them. “Are Potions and healing such tedious wartime careers that you must invent an entirely new field of magic in order to preoccupy yourself?”

Hermione felt her cheeks warm. Her eyes dropped as the corner of her mouth quirked. “I thought it seemed like a logical way to combine the branches.”

“You would,” Severus said with muffled snort. “If this explodes prematurely, I hope you will recall all the occasions in which I answered your incessant questions with the reminder that just because a thing can be imagined by you, doesn’t mean it should be attempted.”

He sighed. “You always were an insufferable student to teach.” There was a pause as he eyed the bomb again. “This is precisely why.”

Hermione ducked her head to hide a smile.

That night she apparated to Whitecroft and waited nearly half an hour before Draco appeared.

She’d barely seen Draco since he’d returned from his trip. He’d brought the occasional report and renewed warnings that Voldemort was likely preparing for his own final blow. More Death Eaters than merely Lucius were being brought back to England.

She’d decided, from the beginning, not to mention her most recent occupation within the Order.

When he appeared in the shack, he was dressed in formal robes, and his expression was braced. It was as though he had expected to find her bleeding to death on the floor. Relief flooded across his face as he stared at her. “I can’t stay unless it’s an emergency, I’m at a dinner. What is it?”

She wanted to reach out and touch him, but she held herself back. Her fingers still hadn’t fully healed; she had them carefully glamoured to hide the scarring.

“I was sent to tell you the Resistance will attack Hogwarts in two days. It will begin at precisely noon.”

His jaw twitched. “I’m assuming you will not be there.”

Hermione nodded. “I’ll be in the hospital.”

His eyes narrowed as he kept studying her. “The Order found a way through the wards?” Hermione didn’t react. “Yes. The wards have been taken into account.”

“What do you need me to do?”

She licked her lips and curled her left hand into a tight fist. “Harry will be there. We want a final confrontation, but before we can do that, we need to kill Nagini. Harry says he’s positive she’s a horcrux. Either get her brought or find a way to kill her when she’s left behind.”

His eyes gleamed. “If the Dark Lord appears, she’ll be there.”

“Good.” Hermione gave a sharp nod. “That’s all we need.”

She turned to leave, but Draco stepped forward and caught her arm. His eyes were dark as he closed in on her. “Come back. Tonight.”

She shook her head firmly. “You said we couldn’t, Draco. This isn’t a time to take risks.”

She tried to back away, but his other hand caught her hip, and he backed her into the door. He seemed to have forgotten he was the one who couldn’t linger.

“I want to see you.” He slid his hand up her arm to her jaw, tilting her face up towards his.

Hermione’s breath caught, and she shivered.

She was cold. She was so cold, and he was warm.

It might be the last time.

She wavered. “Alright. I’ll come. You have go now though.”

He let go of her. “I’ll call you.”

She nodded, and he vanished without a sound. She went back to Grimmauld Place and carefully finished healing her hands until the scarring was almost undetectable. The fingerprints on her right hand were gone, but unless she looked for them under certain light, it barely showed.

She traced her fingers down her sternum. With treatment, the scars on her chest had faded so that the injury was less mangled looking. Her inner breasts had been pocked with acid burns all the way into the mammary tissue, which she’d managed to restore somewhat. The scarring, however, was permanent. The best she could do was treat them so that the scar tissue was elastic and add cumulative glamours so the injury would fade and become less discolored and painful looking.

It was three in the morning when her ring burned.

Draco appeared the instant she stepped into the shack and apparated them. She found herself crushed against the wall as his lips found hers, and he ravenously kissed her.

She gripped him tightly, running her hands along his shoulders, desperate for the feel of him. Her fingertips were overly-sensitive from all the new skin she’d regrown.

She gave a low whimper against his lips as his hands slid up her throat to cradle her jaw, and he drew back to study her, his sharp eyes taking in every detail of her face.

Someday I am going to love him in a moment that isn't stolen, she promised herself. "You're alright? You've been alright?" he asked, studying her.

"Yes. I'm fine. I'm fine. Are you alright? Have you been hurt at all?" She gripped his hands in hers.

Draco dropped his forehead against hers. They stood for a minute before he slipped his hands free and turned her face up to study her eyes again. She knew she looked tired, and thinner, and grey from staying indoors with little sunshine. She gave him a wan smile as she met his gaze.

"I should have called you sooner." His fingers were tracing along her cheekbones as though he expected her to shatter in his hands.

She shook her head.

"It wouldn't have been worth the risk. We shouldn't be doing this now. I shouldn't have come," she said as her hold on his robes tightened. She drew his mouth down against hers. As he kissed her, he pulled her away from the wall and walked her backwards towards the bed.

The steady tick of the clock on the wall felt like a countdown.

She usually unbuttoned his clothing, or pulled at it until the buttons gave away, but instead she pulled her wand out and muttered a spell she'd used a thousand times in the hospital ward. His clothing flickered and phased off of him. She repeated the spell on her own clothes.

"Efficient," he said under his breath as his hand slid up her bare spine. She gave a breathy gasp as his skin pressed against hers."I don't want to waste time."

She ran her fingers along his neck and down over his shoulders. She was so desperate she could feel her heart pounding inside her chest as he arched her body against his chest and kissed across her breasts and down her stomach as he pushed her back into the bed.

She reached for him, pulling on his shoulders. "Please, Draco—we don't have time to go slow. I can't come back tomorrow."

He lifted his mouth from her hip, and she ran her fingers along his jaw, feeling the faint stubble under her fingertips. She pulled him back up her body and traced her fingers lightly across the back of his neck as she kissed him, parting her legs and wrapping them around his hips.

She didn't close her eyes. She kept them open and studied him, memorising everything in his face. She watched the way his eyes flickered and changed colour when the pupils dilated, silver, grey, mercury, diamond, and ice. She wanted to commit to memory the way he felt under her hands; the tendons in his neck and the curvature of his bones; the taste of his skin and the scent of oak moss and papyrus and cedar in his skin when she buried her face in his shoulder.

He entwined their fingers as he pushed inside her. His expression was of possessive, searing adoration and a hunger that she could feel in her soul.

She kissed him. She closed her eyes as she kissed him.

Don't let this be the last time. Don't let this be the last time. She said it to herself over and over again as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Afterwards, Draco had her gathered against his chest, his head resting against the top of hers, his

fingers drawing runes and patterns across her skin. *I'm going to take care of you. I'm always going to take care of you. I'm going to take care of you. I'm going to take care of you.*

The words were silent, but she could hear them in the shifting of the air, and feel the faint, rapid movement of his jaw as he mouthed them. Over and over again, until her throat felt thick.

She closed her eyes for several minutes before she sat up and stared intently at Draco.

As he looked up at her, his quicksilver eyes were guarded. She studied him, memorising him; this aspect of him that was hers alone.

She entwined her fingers with his and traced her over-sensitive fingertips along the ridges of his knuckles. Her mouth twitched, and she hesitated.

"Draco," she finally said, "there's a chance—we're hoping, that the war will end at Hogwarts. We don't—we aren't sure how much longer we're going to last, if it doesn't." His fingers twitched.

"If it doesn't—" she gave a tight, half-sobbed laugh, "—well, we'll just keep trying then, I suppose. But—if it is. If this is the beginning of the end of the war, you—" she bit her lip and hesitated, "—your vow to aid the Order will be fulfilled, and if you stay and try to keep your cover in place to help us, you may risk violating the secondary vow you made. So—all that to say, if Harry manages to defeat You-Know-Who on Tuesday, you have to go,"—she looked up from his hand and met his eyes—"you have to run."

Draco's expression didn't so much as ripple.

Hermione looked down and played with the ring on his hand. "I—there will be things I'll be needed for, so I wouldn't—I won't be able to go with you—if we win. But you should go anyway."

Draco scoffed. "I'm not going to leave without you, Granger, I'll—"

Her throat tightened. She pressed her fingers to his lips and met his eyes. "You have to run. If you're caught—I might not be able to protect you. If you're put on trial, even with Moody and I testifying for you, you could still be kissed or executed. If he dies—as soon as he dies —go. You'll finally be free. It will be your life, Draco." He sat up, his expression contemptuous. "I'm never leaving you behind."

Hermione's stomach dropped, and she shook her head, looking down. "I've been thinking about this for a while. Draco, I have to stay. My job starts after the battles. At the end—things could be messy. The Death Eaters will be desperate. You'd be a high priority to catch, and I don't know if I'll be able to protect you—there—there will be a lot that will come out." He leaned forwards and gripped her hand. "You're mine. Now and after the war. Your oath, you swore it."

"I am." She looked up and met his eyes. "I promised you always, and I meant it. Always, always, as long as I live. But—," her chest tightened, and her jaw trembled, "—I won't be ready to go when you'll need to. I don't want you to risk getting caught because you're waiting for me." Draco's eyes narrowed into slits. "How long do you expect I'd be waiting?" Hermione's eyes dropped. "I don't know. That's why I want you to go without me." "You have an idea, I'm sure."

She shook her head. "I don't know how fast things will move. It might be that I'll have chance to leave once the hospital quiets. But—if we have prisoners and victims from Sussex, I'll be the one responsible to care for them—last time—last year, it was several months. Trials could start by then,

and then—I might not be able to—to leave. I don't want to have to worry you'll try to come for me and get caught." "You're referring to your trial; for your alleged war crimes." His tone was accusing.

Hermione looked away. "I'm sure it won't be for long. Once I'm free—I'll go somewhere you can find me. This—it will be good for you—to have some time to find yourself on your own."

"Is that why you came tonight? Because you wanted to say this to me?" There was a derisive drawl in his tone.

He gripped her hand and pulled her towards him until their faces were almost touching and slid a hand up her throat.

"You're mine. Mine. You swore it. Your fucking Order sold you to me to buy themselves time. If anyone tries to put you in a cell to make themselves heroic, I will kill them."

He didn't wait for her to respond; he kissed her as though he were trying to brand her with his lips. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

When the hands on the clock pointed to five sharp, she drew back. "I have to go. I have more work."

She redressed quickly and drew her wand to apparate. Then she hesitated and stepped towards Draco.

"Be careful, Draco. And just—keep in mind what I said, if you get a chance—"

His expression was so hard he could have been carved from marble. "I'll see you after the battle."

Her fingers twitched. "Please, be careful, Draco."

*Don't die.* The unspoken words hang in the air.

She swallowed and apparated away.

Grimmauld Place was almost throbbing with nervous activity. There were dozens of Resistance leaders whose names Hermione didn't even know in the war room, meeting with Moody and the rest of the Order. The attack was being planned as both a rescue and final confrontation.

Hermione was in the hospital ward working on preparations with Poppy, Padma, and the other field healers and nurses the Resistance had.

In the middle of the afternoon, Bill's Irish Setter patronus came bounding into Grimmauld Place in search of Moody. Alastor left, leaving Remus and Tonks to run the meetings for an hour.

Hermione went to visit Ginny. It was off-schedule, but she didn't know how much time she'd have for the next several days. She handed Ginny a counter-potion for the spattergroit glamour and flicked her wand to remove the additional glamour spells on Ginny's stomach.

"How are you?" she asked, sitting down as Ginny's skin cleared, and her stomach slowly swelled into a bump set low in her pelvis.

"Bored out of my mind, especially when I can hear everyone rushing around out there getting ready for tomorrow," Ginny said. Her face was pensive and regretful, but her eyes were bright. "Do you think it really could be the final battle?" Hermione twitched a shoulder and looked away. "If it's not,

I don’t know what we’re going to do.”

“Here, he’s awake. You can feel him kicking.” Ginny caught Hermione’s hand and pressed it against her stomach, just above her hip bone. There was a pause, then Hermione felt a faint flutter under her palm.

“Feel that?” Ginny said.

“Yes, I felt it.” There was another flutter and then stillness for several minutes.

“He probably went to sleep ” Ginny said, making a face. “You should feel him at night, I think he does somersaults.”

“I wonder where he gets his insomniac troublemaking genes from,” Hermione said in a dry voice as she stroked her fingers along Ginny’s stomach.

“Can you imagine him at Hogwarts someday after the war is over?” Ginny’s eyes were shining.

Hermione met Ginny’s gaze and managed a wan smile as she withdrew her hand. ”I pity the professors.”

Hermione waved her wand and brought up all the diagnostics.

Ginny put her hand on Hermione’s wrist. “You don’t need to. I’ve been practicing, and I can pretty much do all the checkups. Just—talk to me. How’s Harry? Is Ron alright? Have you seen Mum lately? I’ve got all these letters from them, but it’s always just half the story.”

“Harry is—,” Hermione hesitated and put her wand away, “Well, he’s doing better at the moment. Padma and I have had him in the hospital ward for the last few weeks, to get his weight up and monitor his sleep. So, he—he’s seeming a bit better, I think. He still has a lot of nightmares, I’ve been trying to get him to practice occlumency, but he won’t listen to me about it. With the attack coming up, he’s finally stopped sneaking out and getting into fights. But he’s making up for it by smoking more.” Hermione gave a small sigh. “He’s been very quiet lately, even with Ron.”

Hermione fidgeted with her nails. “Ron’s—Ron’s holding on. He knows Harry is relying on him, but he’s still broken-hearted over Lavender, and he still thinks Kingsley’s death is his fault. But he’s—he’s holding on.” “Do you think it’s going to work tomorrow?”

Hermione felt as though there were a pit of acid in her stomach. “Well—the Arithmancy numbers are good. Flitwick and Minerva both looked over my theory, and so far we haven’t heard anything that indicates it’s blown up prematurely.” Her heart was pounding violently in her chest, and she kept speaking more and more rapidly. “If it doesn’t go off, most of the Resistance is going to be there waiting and—”

“I wasn’t referring to your part. I meant, do you think the Order can win tomorrow?”

Hermione swallowed, her mouth dry. “We’re going to try.” She looked towards the door. “Ginny, I really can’t stay. I’m supposed to take Dreamless Sleep and get a few hours of rest before tomorrow. I still have a thousand things to do.”

“Oh right. Of course.” Ginny deflated. “I won’t keep you.”

Hermione pulled out vials of potion to restore the spattergroit glamours and watched carefully to

ensure they took effect properly.

“I’ll let you know how it goes, as soon as we know,” Hermione said, glancing towards the door.

“Tell Harry I love him. Tell him I believe in him,” Ginny’s voice trembled.

Hermione turned back and gave her a small smile. “I will.”

It was the earliest hours of morning when groups of the Resistance started heading out towards Scotland. Hermione went to triple-check the potion inventories. Padma had already checked the inventory, but there were some potions Padma didn’t know about that Hermione wanted to count the stores on. She was halfway through her count when she felt her personal wards breached.

She snapped a compartment closed and was recounting Skele-Gro vials when Harry appeared at the door.

She paused and looked over at him.

Harry rarely came to see her before he left. He’d leave on missions without a word, as though leaving things open-ended meant they’d surely carry on once he came back. Or he’d stop by to give quick, “I’m heading out. See you in two weeks.”

There was never any mention of risk. It was like the summer holidays in school. Just a brief parting. The reunion was always regarded as inevitable.

He looked different. His stay in the hospital ward had gotten his features to fill out slightly, and his eyes seemed less dull and sunken. His colouring was pale but not so grey.

There was a pensive forlornness about him. The skinny boy in oversized clothes with broken glasses, who bought a trolley cart worth of snacks for his friend. He felt bruised. Not physically, but emotionally; as though he’d been beaten into the ground. Hermione studied him in silence for several seconds.

“What is it, Harry?”

Her voice was soft, cautious. A voice she’d learned in the hospital ward.

The corner of his mouth twitched, and he cocked his head to the side. “I think this is going to be it.”

Hermione gave him a small smile. “I hope so. I hope we’re right about this.”

“I—,” Harry started to speak and then fell silent. He fidgeted with the knob on the door. “I— I’m going to try to kill him. I haven’t told anyone else. But I keep thinking about the prophecy. If it’s real, I have to kill him. I don’t think I can fight this war again.”

Hermione stepped over and took his hand, entwining her fingers with his and staring into his eyes.

“I believe in you, Harry. I told you when you were eleven that you were a great wizard. I’ve never stopped believing it.”

Harry gave her a wan smile, but it faded as quickly as it appeared. He stared at her, and he seemed almost like a ghost. As though her fingers might suddenly fall through his hand.

“Hermione, I think I’m going to die today.” Hermione stared at him. She’d never heard him say

anything like that before. No matter the battle, no matter the injury, no matter the odds; Harry had always believed they'd make it to the next day.

"No!" Her voice cracked like a whip. "No. The whole Order and most of the a Resistance is going to be there—"

"Hermione—" Harry interrupted her with a firm voice. He let out a low breath and looked down at their hands. "I can feel it. I thought—for awhile I thought there would be more—" his shoulder twitched, and his lips pressed together. "—that winning would just be the beginning. But—I'm—I think you're right. You were always right. The war—is going to be all there is for me."

Hermione felt as though she'd been struck. She gripped his hand tighter. "That's not how I meant it, Harry. That's not how I ever meant it. You cannot go to Hogwarts today with this mindset. This will work. I swear—the equations were perfect—I checked them a hundred times. We can win. You can do this. Ginny's waiting for you—"

"Hermione, stop." Harry cut her off. "I need to say all this before I go."

He drew a sharp breath. "I'm sorry it took me so long to believe you. I wanted you to be wrong about it all. I didn't realise how angry I was at you just because I wanted you to be wrong. I just—I don't have time to make it up to you." He was speaking faster and faster as though he were running out of time. As though he could see the remaining minutes of his life, and there were few.

"I know I shouldn't be here asking you for anything but—but—I want to ask you to take care of Ginny for me. In case I die." His hold on her hand tightened more. "I don't know what's going to happen today. I want to know someone will take care of her. She can't protect herself if she's sick, but I know you'll—you'll—you'll do whatever it takes to keep her safe. I want to know she'll be alright, no matter what happens. I know if she's with you, she will be."

"Harry—you'll come back."

Irritation flashed in Harry's eyes, but before he could speak, there was a noise beyond the door.

Hermione looked up to find Ron poking his head through the door. "Harry, we've gotta go. Everyone's waiting downstairs."

"Right. I'm coming." Harry let go and stepped back. He gave Hermione one last look and a small salute before headed down the stairs. Hermione watched him until his head vanished from sight.

Ron lingered until Hermione looked back at him. "He alright?"

Hermione's eyes dropped away. "He wanted me to promise to take care of Ginny, in case he dies today. Ron, watch him."

Ron's expression tightened, but he seemed unsurprised. "I will. Wherever Harry goes, I'll never be more than a few steps behind him."

Her mouth opened before she knew what to say. "Ron. Be careful, Ron." She reached for him. "Bring him back."

He gave her a crooked smile that didn't reach his eyes.

He was so aged by the war. His narrow face was gaunt. His cheekbones jutted out, and his features

were lined. The grey streaks in his hair had grown thicker. He looked so much older than twenty-two. Lavender's death had extinguished some of the light in him.

Hermione hadn't even known. Hadn't noticed the relationship until it was gone.

His pale blue eyes still had steel in them. "I bring him back every mission. That's my job." He glanced towards the stairs, and Hermione could tell his mind was on the day ahead. "Take care, Mione. This one could hit hospital ward hard."

She gave a shaky nod.

"Right. Well, they're waiting for me now." Ron rested his hand on her shoulder for a moment and turned to leave. Hermione stood alone in the potion cabinet, trying to remember when they had stopped hugging each other goodbye.

*Flashback 36*

**July 2003**

The hours of July 1st crawled past. Hermione and the other healers stood in the foyer, watching the clock. Waiting. There was little conversation.

Hermione stood by the window, drawing runes on the glass, carefully occluding every thought of Draco from her mind. Dread was twisted through her like an invasive vine. Her eyes kept darting over to clock. It was almost noon. Her hands began to tremble faintly. She gripped the window frame as she kept watching the clock.

Seamus had promised to send a patronus.

When the clock struck noon, Hermione stood, too afraid to even breathe as she watched the minutes continue to creep by.

There was nothing.

You did it wrong. You made a mistake. You miscalculated. They all trusted you, and you miscalculated something.

She kept staring at the hands until the room started blurring. Her fingertips and arms began to prick as she kept looking mutely at the clock. Her heart pounding so violently there was a sharp stabbing sensation through her chest.

A white, lumescent fox suddenly burst into the foyer. “It worked! Noon exactly! The bloody thing took off the top of the Astronomy tower and ripped the wards down.”

Hermione stood frozen until the fox vanished, then she gave a ragged gasp, and her knees gave out. She sat in the middle of the floor, sobbing. Her chest felt as though it were fracturing. She pressed her hands against her sternum and tried to breathe, her lungs jerking painfully.

It worked. She curled her head and pressed her jaw against her shoulder as she kept struggling to make herself breathe. There was burning throughout her throat and lungs. The bomb had worked. She was shuddering with relief. There were voices, but she couldn’t make them out.

She pressed her hands over her mouth and tried to stop crying. Calm down. Calm down. You’re on duty. She buried her face in the crook of her arm and sobbed with relief until her head began throbbing.

A warm hand wrapped around her elbow and helped her up from the floor. “Come on, dear,” Poppy said, wrapping an arm around Hermione’s shoulders as she kept sobbing against the back of her hand. “Let’s get you a cup of tea. Padma will call if anyone’s brought in.”

Poppy led Hermione down the hallway into the kitchen and seated her at the table. Hermione brushed her tears off her face and closed her eyes, forcing herself to breathe in to a count of four and

then out to a count of six until her chest stopped spasming. Her sternum ached. She pressed her hand against the middle of her chest until she felt her heart rate slowing.

The kitchen was strangely silent. She opened her eyes and found herself surrounded by dozens of diagnostic projections. Poppy was standing beside her, her expression tense as she examined and manipulated all the various spells she'd cast over Hermione.

Hermione's stomach dropped so sharply her hands clenched, tension burning through her spine as though she'd been electrocuted. She whipped out her own wand, banishing everything Poppy had cast with a sharp, slashing movement.

"I thought you said tea, Poppy. Has the definition changed?" Her throat was tight, and acid dripped from the words.

Poppy looked up at Hermione, her expression unapologetic. "You may be a healing prodigy, but I've been a healer for decades longer than you. You—should be on several potions for your anxiety."

Hermione pushed her jaw out, then swallowed and dropped her eyes. "I can't. They interfere with my occlumency."

Poppy sniffed. "Occlumency is a bandage on a bombarda curse. You're not fixing anything by dissociating, you're hiding it. And"—her tone grew pointed—"it's growing exacerbated by your use of the Dark Arts."

Hermione stiffened and looked up quickly.

Poppy met her gaze steadily. "I'm no fool. I've suspected for long time what kinds of spells you've been using in order to deconstruct and stop some of those curses from Sussex so quickly. You—you—"

Poppy's voice cut off, and she pressed her lips together for several seconds, her mouth trembling. She drew a deep breath. "Dark Magic is cumulative. Mind or body, it exacts a price. I haven't said anything until now because I know you understand the toll better than I do." She placed a tentative hand on Hermione's shoulder. "You must know you're reaching the point where the damage is becoming irreversible."

Hermione's mouth twitched, and she looked away, noting the privacy spells that had been cast on the room.

"I know." She stared down at her hands. "I—it wasn't—it didn't used to—" She fell silent and her hand rose subconsciously to her throat, fidgeting with the empty chain there. She shook her head. "Never mind. It doesn't matter."

She looked up at Poppy with a wan smile. "I'll stop when the war is over. I'll stop. I promise. And, I'll see a mind healer too."

Poppy gave sad sigh and nodded, rubbing small circles on Hermione's back. "All of you children should see mind healers. You and Harry especially. I wish I'd pushed Albus harder about having Harry taken to St Mungo's."

Hermione blinked and furrowed her eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

“Oh.” Poppy gave another sigh, and her exhaustion grew visible in her face. “During Harry’s first year, after that unfortunate situation with Professor Quirrell, when I first examined Harry, I became concerned about his magical signature. It was irregular, almost as though he had two.” “Two?” Hermione echoed, a cold creeping sensation slowly bleeding over her, as though there was ice sliding through her veins.

“Yes. I’d never seen anything like it before. I went to Albus. He said it must be from the Killing Curse all those years before, that it must have split off a small piece of Harry’s signature. It’s such shame no one thought to have him examined as a baby before he was left with his relatives. Albus looked at the diagnostics himself and said it was nothing to be concerned with. When I pushed, he said Harry would likely be subjected to extensive and traumatic examination at St Mungo’s by researchers wanting to use him to study the Killing curse. Albus said he thought the issue would resolve itself eventually. It seemed that it did, over the years the signatures appeared to rebond.”

Poppy tilted her head to the side thoughtfully. “But—with all the headaches he suffers from, I wonder if perhaps it didn’t happen properly.”

Hermione felt as though she’d been struck.

“There were two magical signatures? Not a residual curse signature and a magical signature?” Hermione said sharply.

“Magical,” Poppy said as she nodded and pulled out the chair beside Hermione. She sat down with a sigh. “I tried to find record of a similar phenomena in healing history, but there’s nothing like it that I could find. Then again, Harry is the only person who ever survived the Killing Curse.”

Hermione’s hands started trembling. “You said—I asked you about his magical signature years ago. You said it was fine. That it was normal for Harry.”

Poppy rested her hand gently on Hermione’s shoulder again. “I didn’t want you to worry. By the time you asked, they were almost entirely bonded back together.” Hermione’s mouth twitched, and she struggled to find words to ask the next question. “So it was the same signature? The smaller piece was identical?”

“Not exactly. Due to the split, Albus said it developed uniquely—”

Hermione stood up so abruptly her chair fell backwards, clattering on the stone floor. “That’s not how it works. Magical signatures are soul-based, they don’t—develop differently. I have to go.”

She fled the kitchen and raced upstairs to grab her cloak and satchel and then ran out the door of Grimmauld Place before anyone could stop her.

She apparated with a hard crack and reappeared in the designated spot in the Forbidden Forest that the Order has chosen for approaching Hogwarts.

The castle stood in the distance. Even from where she stood, she could smell the Dark Magic in the air, mixed with the metallic tang of the explosion. She started toward the castle as quickly as she could.

“Granger?” A broad-shouldered Resistance fighter appeared from next to a tree, a disillusionment charm fading away.

She looked over at him sharply. She recognized him vaguely but not well enough to know his name.

“What are you doing here, Granger?” “I need to see Harry.” She stared at him, gripping her wand so tightly she could feel the wood biting into the bones in her hand. Her whole body felt cold. “I came because I need to see Harry.”

The man looked bewildered. “He’s at the castle. Everyone moved in. There’s no one out here but scouts to keep watch.”

Hermione swallowed hard and nodded. “Then I’ll go to the castle.”

They made their way to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. She could see the Astronomy Tower, smoking and damaged from the blast. They stopped near several heavily disillusioned tents.

“Hermione, what are you doing here?” Angelina came out of a tent.

“I need to see Harry.”

“Now? Can’t this wait until tonight?”

Hermione scoffed. “If it could wait I wouldn’t have just apparated five hundred miles.”

“Alright. Fine. I’ll send word. Stay here at camp. We’ll send a few people in to get the message to Harry.” Hermione swallowed and resigned herself to waiting. There was a burning sensation in the pit of her stomach.

It felt like hours. Hermione joined the field healers in the tent, healing the injured fighters and determining who needed to be sent on to Grimmauld Place.

She got snatches of reports on how things were going closer to the castle. After the bomb went off, the wards had collapsed entirely. The Resistance had moved in quickly. The attack had taken the prison entirely off-guard. Beyond the wards the security was surprisingly lax. The guards had fallen back.

The Resistance currently held the Entrance Hall and the Great Hall. They were trying to strengthen their foothold before the inevitable counterstrike.

There was a nervous energy over how well the attack had gone so far. Harry and the team that had snuck into Hogwarts during the initial attack still had not reappeared.

The air in the tent felt suffocating, filled with the scent of blood, residual Dark Magic, and potions. The salty, coppery tang of blood mixed with spent magic burned in her nose.

Hermione worked silently, her eyes sweeping frequently over to the opening of the tent, looking for Harry.

Finally the tent flap was shoved aside, and Harry burst in, followed by Ron and Fred. Her heart jumped into her throat as she caught sight of Harry’s pale face.

*You should have known. He’s your best friend, you should have realised.*

“Hermione, what’s going on?”

Hermione hurried across the tent towards Harry. As soon as he was within reach, her fingers gripped

the fabric of his shirt.

“We got word you were here when we rejoined the main force in the castle.” Harry was covered in dust and grime. He rubbed at his face and left a band of soot across his forehead. “What are you doing here? Did something happen to Ginny?”

“No.” Hermione shook her head sharply. “No. Ginny is fine. She’s back at Grimmauld Place. Come with me, there’s a smaller tent over this way.”

Harry gave a visible sigh of relief and followed her. His pensive mood had vanished. His eyes were clear. He had an air of intense focus about him, the way he had been when playing Quidditch.

“We found it. The one in Hogwarts. It was in the Room of Requirement. It was Ravenclaw’s diadem. Ron cut it in half with the Sword of Gryffindor. So—it's just the snake now. Neville and—”

Hermione pulled him into a small tent and blocked Ron and Fred from following. “I need to check something privately,” she said. “It will just take a few minutes.” Ron looked down at her, his eyebrows furrowed. “Hermione, this really isn’t—Harry’s supposed to be—”

Her stomach knotted painfully as she stared up into Ron’s worried face. “I need a few minutes. This is important,” she said.

Ron studied her and gave a slow nod. “Right. We’ll be outside then.”

Her throat felt thick as she gave a small nod in return. “Thank you.”

She warded the entrance, turned, and found Harry’s questioning face.

She drew a shivering breath. “Harry, I need you to sit down and let me check something. I know this seems like the wrong time, but I need you to trust me.”

She pushed him into a chair and rested her fingers gently against his temple, trying to rub away the dirt smeared across his face. As she studied his face, there was an aching sensation across her cheekbones, and her fingers trembled slightly.

She forced her occlumency walls into place and withdrew her hand. Her fingers were steady, and her attention surgically precise as she cast a complex diagnostic projection over him. Then she started muttering incantations under her breath, weaving an analytic web of magic around him.

She stepped back and studied his magical signature carefully. If there had been two separate signatures in the past, there weren’t anymore. They had bonded almost entirely. She carefully tried to tease them apart, trying to make out which parts belonged to which, but they were conjoined and entwined.

Harry was watching her. “Hermione, what are you doing?”

Hermione ignored him, carefully watching the variance in the projections as she cast a spell on him. It had no effect. She tried several more.

She studied the magic she’d woven around him. There was painful, weighted sensation in her chest. She blinked and met Harry’s eyes, reaching out and resting a hand on his shoulder.

“Harry—I need to touch your scar.”

“No, don’t.” Harry jerked back.

Hermione’s hold on his shoulder tightened until she could feel his bones through his jacket. He’d always been so thin. “Harry, I have to do this. I’m sorry, I know it’s painful. You know I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t urgent.”

Harry wavered and swallowed as he looked up at her. “Fine. You can do it. But tell me why.”

Hermione hesitated, her lips twitching. “Let me check this first—then I’ll tell you what I’m doing.” His eyes searched her face for a moment before he gave a short nod.

Hermione muttered a spell and pressed the tip of her wand against the lighting bolt scar slicing through his forehead. The instant her wand touched the skin, Harry screamed through his teeth, his head whipping back violently as he nearly collapsed. The magical signature projected in front on him suddenly shivered and parts of it slowly turned blood red, casting into stark relief which parts of the signature were foreign. There were red tendrils twisting and tightening where they were entwined and conjoined with the larger magical signature.

It was identical to the magical signature in Hufflepuff’s Cup.

Hermione jerked her wand back with a low gasp. “Oh god.”

“What is that? Hermione! What—is that?” Harry was staring at the projection before him, his face deathly pale.

Hermione felt as though she were being ground into dust inside. She parted her lips, but no sound emerged from her throat.

She forced herself to swallow and tried again. “It’s—it’s a soul shard, Harry. There’s—there’s a piece of Tom’s soul inside you.”

Harry’s jaw went slack, and he turned grey as he continued to stare at the projection in front of him.

Hermione swallowed, and her jaw trembled. She twisted her wand in her hands with shaking fingers. “The—the soul gets torn when the Killing Curse is used. Because of the way the curse backfired when you were a baby, a piece must have gotten severed. Normally it would be placed inside an object—but if it was just left there—it must have latched itself onto the only living thing there and tried to integrate itself with you.”

Her chest felt so tight she could barely breathe. “I’m so sorry. I should have realised sooner. I should have—if I’d realised—I’m so sorry, Harry.”

Harry sat as though frozen as he stared at his magical signature and the parasitic soul fragment that wound around and through it. Hermione’s tongue was curdled in her mouth, as though she were about to be sick.

She tried to think of something, of anything. There had to be some way to get it out, to remove it without killing Harry.

Draco might have a book in his library that she could use. The Resistance would fall back and leave Hogwarts. She had to get Harry away and buy herself time to research; there might be something she could do. She just needed to get Harry away. Then she could go to Draco.

“Of course.” Harry gave a small laugh that roused Hermione from her thoughts. “Of course— that’s how it is. ‘Neither can live while the other survives.’ I should have guessed.” He made a sound, and Hermione wasn’t sure if it was another laugh or a sob. He stood up, banishing the projections around him with a flick of his own wand. Then he raised a hand and pressed the heel against his scar.

“All this time—I thought I was the Chosen One because Tom and I were similar. Half Bloods, orphans, twin wandcores, parselmouths...” His voice trailed off, and he gave a low laugh. “All this time—I thought I’d defeat him by rejecting Dark Magic and always choosing light—even when I felt like I was going mad from the draw of it. I thought that was what it was about. That it was something like that.” Harry made a choking sound. “Of course it wasn’t.”

There was a silence like a stopped heart.

Then there was an agonized scream in the distance that ripped the air apart.

“Harry! We’ve gotta go,” Ron yelled through the warded tent opening.

Harry looked up sharply, but his eyes were far away as though he were in a dream. He looked at Hermione and only seemed to be half-aware of her. “You’ll take care of Ginny, won’t you? And tell Ron, afterwards, he was the best partner a bloke could ask for.”

He started towards the door, and Hermione realised with freezing horror what Harry intended to do. She flung herself in front of him, gripping his arms and forcing him to stop.

“No, Harry. No. I can fix this. We got the horcrux in Hogwarts. We’ll fall back. Give me some time, and I’ll find a way to remove it. I’m sure there’s a way. I will make a way. Harry —Harry.” She tried to force him to look into her eyes. “You’re not going to die today.”

Harry reached up and touched her face with his fingertips. He studied her as though he were memorising her. As though he hadn’t seen her in years and never expected to see her again.

“You’re a good friend, Hermione. You’ve always believed in me. Even more than I did sometimes.”

She flinched away from his touch. “We’ll send word to Moody and have everyone pull out before more Death Eaters arrive. Harry—you have to let me try to find a way to remove it.”

Harry shook his head and gave a wistful smile. “He’s in my head, Hermione. The connection we have, it’s in my brain. There’s no safe way to reverse long-term Dark Magic in the brain. That’s what you said after you tried to heal Arthur.”

Hermione’s fingers twitched.

“I’ll find a way. I will invent it if I have to.” Hermione’s voice shook with intensity. “You have to let me try.”

Harry grasped her wrist and firmly pulled her hands off him. “Hermione—I told you this morning, today is the day. This is how it’s supposed to be. Neither can live, neither will survive. This is how it was always supposed to be.”

“No, it’s not. We can keep fighting. We’ll pull out—” He stared at her, his face serious. “People died today, Hermione. They’ve been dying for years, fighting for me, protecting me, coming here so I could get into Hogwarts. My whole life—people have died trying to protect me. I can't let anyone

else die for me—not when I know I have the power to stop all of this. This war can't go longer. It has to end. This—is what I'm supposed to do." He looked down at the ground, and the resolution in his expression fractured somewhat. "You'll take care of Ginny, won't you? And tell her—tell her she'll be what I'm thinking of —to the very end."

He started to move past her, but Hermione grabbed him again. Her throat closed, as though her desperation was strangling her.

"Harry—Harry—Ginny is pregnant."

Harry froze as though she'd petrified him. Then he turned and stared at her, his expression uncomprehending.

Hermione gave a small sob. Her heart was beating so hard it felt as though it were being bruised inside her chest. "She realised she was pregnant in February, and she asked me to hide it because she was afraid it would be too much for you to be worrying about. But she's pregnant. It's a boy. He's due in October. So you—you can't die—because you have to meet your son. Please, please, come with me—" Her voice broke.

Harry shook his head slowly. "Don't—don't do this to me, Hermione. Don't say something like that to try to stop me."

There were cold tears escaping the corners of her eyes, and her voice shook with intensity. "I'm not lying to you, Harry. I swear on my magic. She's almost six months pregnant. Ever since she learned the gender, she's called him James."

Harry paled and made a pained sound in the back of his throat.

Hermione's face twisted as she tried not to cry. She gripped him more tightly. "Please— Harry. Let's go find Alastor and have everyone pull back."

Harry started shaking. She could see him wavering.

"Please, Harry."

The noise, the screaming outside was growing louder. She heard Ron yell again. Harry twitched and looked towards the tent opening.

He dropped his head down for a moment, and he drew a sharp breath.

"Promise me you'll take care of them for me."

Hermione felt something inside her shrivel and die. Her hands dropped away, falling limp at her sides. Harry's fingers darted out; he caught her right hand and gripped it. His eyes were desperate. "Promise me, Hermione. Promise me."

"I promise." The words felt as though they were torn out of her heart and dragged up her throat. They fell like blood from her lips. "I'll always take care of them, as long as I live."

His grip on her hand tightened, and his body slumped with relief. Then he let go and stepped back "Thank you. Thank you for everything you did for me."

He reached into his pocket, pulled out his Invisibility Cloak, and disappeared.

Hermione stood dazedly staring at the spot he'd vanished from. She hardly felt able to think. It was as though her entire life had dropped out from under her feet.

She forced herself to move and stumbled to the entrance of the tent.

"Hermione, where's Harry?" Ron stared past her into the empty tent.

"Gone—," her voice was broken, rasping. She gripped the canvas of the tent until her knuckles showed white. "I'm sorry. I tried to stop him. He put on his cloak and disappeared."

"What did you—? Fuck. Never mind. Get out of here, there's more Death Eaters than we thought they had." Ron was looking wildly around at the battle that was closing in on them. "I'll find Harry. You get out of here."

Before Hermione could say anything, Ron and Fred had run off towards the castle.

Hermione stood in the opening of the tent, watching, as though she were trapped in a nightmare on the edge of a battlefield.

There were spells flying in every direction. The air was thick with the smell of smoke, spent curses, blood, and burning flesh. A cacophony of screams and the shouted incantations. The Death Eater reinforcements were coming from Hogsmeade, a huge force sweeping up and hemming the Resistance against the walls of Hogwarts.

A witch thirty feet away from Hermione was hit by a purple curse and fell. As she struck the ground, her head turned towards Hermione, face slack, eyes blank. Hermione's hand twitched. She recognized the woman. She'd healed her, saved her life, a little more than a month ago, after the battle in Surrey.

The Death Eater who'd killed the witch turned to move on, his face was unmasked. As Hermione caught sight of his features, the blood in her veins ran cold.

She recognised him.

She had seen him before. He'd been captured, months earlier, during one of the Order's prison rescues. He was one of the innumerable Death Eaters she'd prepped for stasis and administered the Draught of Living Death to. He'd been handed over to Bill and Fleur to be placed in the Order's prison. Her eyes swept across the battlefield again: five years of prisoners, removed from stasis and sent into battle. That was why there were more Death Eaters than the Order had expected.

How had they found the prison? They should never have been able to find it. The Order had specifically created it with the purpose of ensuring that even if the war was lost, the prison still wouldn't be compromised.

There was an explosion so violent the ground shook. Dozens of Resistance fighters were flung back by a growing, writhing inferno of flames. The air grew thick and putrid and sulfuric as an enormous burning serpent slithered across the field, forcing the Resistance further back.

Voldemort stood beside it, flanked by a group of masked and unmasked Death Eaters, his snake Nagini draped across his shoulders.

"Harry Potter, come and face me."

Voldemort's voice was high and cold, like the edge of a blade dragged along the spine. It was amplified, so Hermione could hear the sibilant edge of his pronunciation as though he were at her shoulder, speaking directly into her ear.

"Give yourself up, or I will punish every man, woman, and child foolish enough to follow and protect you."

Harry did not appear or step forward.

Hermione had never seen Voldemort in person before. She's heard countless descriptions, but it was the first time she'd ever seen him.

He was thin and horrifyingly pale; his eyes red as blood and almost glowing.

Dozens of fighters suddenly rushed forward to attack. Voldemort flicked his wand, and they were thrown back violently. The group of Death Eaters behind him moved forward, but Voldemort stilled them with a gesture.

"Your beloved Chosen One has brought you here and abandoned you," Voldemort said.

The Resistance kept re-advancing and being forced back. Alastor was among them. He was fighting savagely, flanked by Remus and Tonks. Minerva was dueling alongside them; she'd left her orphans in order to help Harry infiltrate Hogwarts and find the horcrux. Many of the DA members were in each renewed charge. Parvati. Seamus. Angelina kept fighting forward despite her limp. Neville too. He dodged several spells until he managed to get noticeably close to Voldemort.

After several attacks by the Resistance Voldemort seemed to grow bored of waiting for Harry. He flung most of the Resistance back but caught Neville in a body-bind and stepped closer, studying Neville's face.

"Rushing forward without a wand in your hand. The Resistance is a disease in the magical world. Nagini, enjoy this one." He extended his arm, and Nagini used it to slither down from his shoulders and drop to the ground. Voldemort turned and directed his fiendfyre serpent to advance on the Resistance.

Nagini reared back to strike, but as she did so, Neville suddenly broke free of the magic restraining him. His hand shot out. As Voldemort had said, he wasn't holding a wand. Hermione's heart stalled as the sword of Gryffindor flashed through the air and severed Nagini's head.

The snake dropped, and a wave of dark magic rippled out and dissipated into the air.

Voldemort gave a scream of rage that tore through the air with such violence Hermione could feel the pressure against her eardrums. He raised his wand to curse Neville, but, before a spell left his lips, Harry appeared, standing protectively in front of Neville.

"Here I am, Tom," Harry said. His voice was almost too quiet to hear compared to Voldemort's amplification.

The entire field went still.

Harry and Voldemort stood facing each other at the base of the Astronomy Tower.

Voldemort seemed surprised to suddenly find Harry before him. He stared at him for several

seconds in silence without moving. “Harry Potter,” he finally whispered. “The Boy Who Lived.”

No one in the Resistance moved. The Death Eaters did not move. They were all waiting. The whole war reduced to a moment.

Harry’s wand hung from his fingers. Not raised. Not prepared to duel. He was simply standing, waiting. Facing death with an expression of grief and resignation.

Voldemort seemed baffled. He tilted his head to one side and stared at Harry for several seconds before extending his wand.

Hermione saw his mouth move.

A flash of green light.

The curse struck Harry, and a backlash of power ricocheted back and struck Voldemort, throwing him off his feet.

Harry dropped to the ground.

Hermione felt as though her heart had ceased beating. She didn’t scream, but she could feel a strangled sob in her chest and throat, like a creature in its death throes, trying to break free.

It felt like she was dying too.

*Harry. Please. You’re the boy who lived.* The entire army was too shocked to make a sound.

Voldemort stood up, almost shakily, but Harry still lay where he’d fallen.

“My Lord.” Lucius Malfoy and several other unmasked Death Eaters had gathered around Voldemort.

“I do not require assisssstance.” Voldemort jerked away from the hands extended towards him. “Is the boy dead?”

Ron and Fred and several others were moving towards Harry, but before they could reach him, Voldemort cast a spell, and Harry’s body was violently jerked across the grass towards him.

“Allow me, my Lord,” Lucius said, giving a low bow to Voldemort before approaching Harry’s body.

Lucius was gaunt, even from a distance. It was as though his skin were tightly drawn over his bones. His blond hair was longer than it had been when Hermione had fought him in the Ministry so many years before. He still moved with an easy grace almost reminiscent of Draco, but there was an edge of eager unpredictability woven into the way he moved. An aristocratic bloodlust.

He knelt down next to Harry and slowly slid a hand up Harry’s throat.

Lucius’ hand jerked back, and he stood as though burned.

“He’s alive.”

As the words were uttered, Harry suddenly moved, his wand whipping up.

Voldemort was quicker and already poised to strike. *“Avada Kedavra.”*

The curse struck Harry in the chest, and his green eyes went blank.

Voldemort wasn't done. His face contorted with rage.

"*Avada Kedavra*." The curse struck Harry's body again.

There was screaming now. The Resistance screamed Harry's name, over and over. Hermione gave a low sob, torn from deep in her chest, gripping the canvas of the tent in order to keep from dropping with despair onto the ground.

"Harry!" Ron threw himself towards Harry.

A scarlet curse shot out from among the Death Eaters and struck Ron. He flew through the air and crashed into the Astronomy Tower with a sickening crunch that Hermione could hear across the field. Other Resistance fighters were moving towards Harry too, as though they didn't know what to do but try to reach his body.

Run. Hermione wanted to scream it, beg it, plead it. Leave the dead behind.

Run.

"A*vada Kedavra*!" Voldemort cast another killing curse on Harry.

Hermione started to flee but flinched as she heard another "A*vada Kedavra*!"

She looked back one last time and watched Voldemort walk over, casting the Killing Curse on Harry a sixth time. Voldemort's right hand was extended, his wand hanging from his fingertips, but his left hand was pressed lightly against the centre of his chest.

The gesture was strangely human. As though he were injured but trying to hide it.

There was still a horcrux left. Harry's plan would have worked, it should have worked, but there was still a horcrux left.

Hermione's eyes swept across the battlefield. The fighting had resumed, but the Resistance had lost. They were too shocked and despairing as they tried to defend themselves.

Hermione's hand twitched forward. Then she set her jaw and slammed her occlumency walls into place.

You can't save them. Someone has to find the last horcrux. She turned and bolted towards the apparition point.

As soon as she was away from the disillusioned tents, she was spotted. Several spells shot past her as she made for the treeline.

A curse grazed her shoulder, but her cloak blocked it. She flung herself into the forest. As she reached the anti-apparition marker, a Death Eater suddenly appeared, blocking her path and catching hold of her arm.

Hermione twisted and broke free, driving her elbow into his diaphragm and flinging herself past the disapparition point. She was vanishing as she felt herself crushed under a body.

She reappeared and choked as her lungs filled with water. She was face-down in water. Her lungs

burning as she tried to fight free. There were stones digging into her as the Death Eater's weight pinned her underwater. She pulled her head up, choking and gasping. The water and blood roaring in her ears. A hand gripped her hair and wrenched her head further back. Her hands scrabbled through the water, she snatched up a rock and twisted her body to smash it into the Death Eater's head before he drowned her.

She managed to strike him once before the rock was knocked from her grip. A moment later everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter contains several lines and paraphrased excerpts of *Harry Potter and the Dealthy Hallows* Chapters 33, 34, and 36.

*Flashback 37*

**July 2003**

She woke with a start and found herself lying on a low, makeshift bed, Draco leaning over her.

She jerked back and then stilled and looked around, realising she was in his safe house in Whitecroft. She looked back at Draco, and everything came rushing back. She drew a sharp breath and felt as though she were being crushed to death. “What—What happened?”

His mouth twitched as he straightened and stared down at her. His expression was a mask, but she could see the restrained rage in his eyes.

“Despite”—the word was bitten out—“your reassurance to me yesterday, you were at Hogwarts. When I discovered it, I tried to grab you, and you proceeded to apparate into a creek. I had to stun you; I thought you might drown yourself before you realised it was me.”

She sat up gingerly, still slightly sore and dazed. She shook her head, trying to clear it of the remaining grogginess. “You were masked; I didn’t recognize you.”

She looked down. Her clothes were dry. Her lungs felt clear, as though it had been a long time since she’d been knocked out. She glanced at her watch, and her stomach dropped sharply. Hours had passed. It was nearly evening.

“How long did you leave me here, unconscious?” Her voice was disbelieving as she looked up at Draco.

His expression was cold. “I wasn’t available to disappear with you. Once I had the water out of your lungs and you were safe, I had to return to fulfill my duties.”

Hermione looked away. Harry.

Ron.

Almost everyone had been at Hogwarts. Aside from Severus, she might be the only remaining active member of the Order.

She pressed her lips together for a minute, collecting herself before she looked up. “I don’t understand. What happened? How did they find our prison?”

He looked away, his hands were clenched into fists. She could almost feel the seething rage rippling around him.

“I don’t know the details of how precisely it occurred. I told you, the Dark Lord is suspicious now. He barely confides in anyone, and he provides different information to each general in an attempt to identify where the intelligence is getting out. I was informed of ten different plans for attack, and none of them were legitimate. I do know he was in Sussex last night, working alone according to all the reports I had. By the time I learned we had your prison, the Resistance was already at Hogwarts.

There was no opportunity to send word."

Hermione sat on the edge of the bed as she absorbed it. She felt too dazed and devastated to even think clearly.

Draco was seething. His hands kept opening and closing as though he were suppressing the urge to break something.

He stood beside her for another moment and then turned and began pacing around the room as though he were a caged animal. "I thought this was supposed to be the Order's final blow? Did Potter think letting the Dark Lord kill him would somehow win the war? Or did he just decide to give up?"

Hermione twitched.

"Harry was a horcrux," she said in a dead voice.

Draco frozen and looked at her sharply. She dropped her eyes and stared at her lap. Her jeans were torn on both knees.

She swallowed and drew her feet back. "I didn't know—until today. I only realised it after the battle had started. There was a prophecy made twenty years ago, 'either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.' Harry thought if all the other horcruxes were destroyed, that having the Dark Lord kill him would cause them both to die."

The sight of Harry's expression going blank flashed before her eyes. Her throat contracted, and her whole body shook. Her cheekbones and chest ached. She felt as though she were on the verge of breaking into pieces.

She was glass, only a breath away from shattering. She gripped the edge of the bed and watched her knuckles turn white. "We missed one. There's another horcrux. I thought—I thought we'd found them all—but I was wrong."

There was a stabbing pain in the back of her throat as she swallowed. "We have to find it."

"The Resistance has lost," Draco said in a flat voice. "The war is over."

Hermione jerked sharply at Draco's words, and there was a flush of heat that burst through her.

"I know. You don't need to tell me. I know we lost!" Her voice was ragged.

She drew a sharp breath, and it burned in her lungs. She pressed her lips together and pressed her hands against her eyes as she exhaled and tried control herself.

"I'm not saying the war isn't over." Her voice was still shaking slightly. "I'm saying we have to find the horcrux. We have to find it. If we can destroy it, he'll die—maybe not immediately, but if he loses all his horcruxes, he'll die." She kept speaking, faster and faster. "The Death Eaters don't share goals with the Dark Beings, the regime will crumble without him. It's not as though he'll ever groom a successor. We just—we have to find it."

There was physically fractured sensation laced through her as she sat there. She felt as though her heart had broken, but she was still too shocked to feel it.

She dropped her head down and pressed her jaw against her shoulder. “The Resistance—is lost. I know. There are maybe a few cells left that were less involved with the Order, but most of our able force was at Hogwarts today. A few people may escape, but otherwise, Severus and I are the only active members of the Order left. We—” she felt as though she were being ground into dust. The weight of everything was too much. “Until we find the remaining horcrux, we can’t try to rescue anyone. They’ll all be traced, we can’t risk both you and Severus trying to get them free. The horcrux has to be the priority. That’s the only way for us to actually end this and really save them.”

“There’s no us. You’re leaving Britain.”

Hermione looked up at Draco.

His eyes were still burning with rage, but his expression was set. “I’ll find it. You’re leaving. There’s no Order left to keep you. Potter is dead.”

She flinched.

He paused for a moment and seemed to be weighing what he was about to say next. “Weasley will be dead within the week. There’s no reason for you to stay. You can’t remain active; it will be easier for me to work if the Dark Lord assumes a victory. If he thinks the Order is still a threat, it will make finding any remaining horcruxes more difficult.”

Hermione’s mouth twitched. “Fine,” she finally said in a tight voice. “I can collaborate long-distance initially.” Draco’s eyes flickered for the briefest moment, and she knew it was his intention to make the arrangement permanent. He would do everything in his power to prevent her from ever returning to Britain if he thought there was any risk from it.

She swallowed and stared at him.

“I’ll go on one condition.”

She watched Draco tense and calculate.

“Ginny Weasley, she has to come with me.”

“No.” His expression was cold. “You said no rescues.”

“It’s not a rescue. She’s at a safe house. Only Ginny. I won’t—” she wavered, and her throat caught, “I won’t ask you to save anyone else. But I have to take Ginny with me. I won’t go without her. She’s just at a safehouse. I can go get her.”

His jaw clenched, and there was something unreadable in his expression.

Hermione pressed forward. “I have to send word to the safe houses, make sure they know that the Order is compromised and tell them to go to ground. Then I’ll get Ginny, and we’ll— we’ll go.”

She stood. She was leaning so heavily into her occlumency she felt almost removed from her body. Physically, she was shattered with grief. There was a pain in her chest as though her sternum were refractured. A phantom pain that always seemed to occur when she was stressed.

But she was managing to occlude the mental aspects somewhat.

Draco shifted as she extended her wand to cast a patronus.

She flicked her hand in the familiar motion and said the words.

Nothing. She swallowed hard and forced her occlumency walls more firmly into place, taking a deep breath before she tried again.

*"Expecto Patronum."* She said it firmly.

Nothing.

Not even a wisp of silver light.

She stared down at her wand.

Harry had taught her how to cast a patronus. Her otter. As she stood there, she realised she'd probably never see it again. Her throat hurt from the effort it took not to cry.

Harry was dead. He was dead. There was nothing she could do to bring him back. Even in the magical world, calling back the dead was nothing more than fairytale.

Every happy memory she'd had was tainted, turned to ashes. Her past was an endless expanse of loss. Her childhood, with parents with new lives and new names and no recollection that they'd ever had a daughter they'd been proud of.

All her years at Hogwarts were defined by a war she'd now lost; by people she'd lost.

She gripped her wand until her knuckles turned white, and slowly lowered it, swallowing hard.

Don't think about it. Make it through the day. She had to get Ginny. She'd promised Harry she'd always take care of Ginny.

That was all she could focus on.

"I'll have to go to the safe houses in person," she finally said after struggling for a moment to make her voice work. "My patronus spell doesn't seem work anymore."

"No."

She looked up, her jaw set. "I have to warn them, Draco. I'm not going to run without warning them. I have to go get Ginny. None of that is negotiable."

Draco's eyes flickered. He looked down and gave sharp sigh, as though he were disappointed by something.

"Granger…" he said after hesitating for moment. "The Death Eaters have your prison. They have all the Order safe houses as well."

The room tilted under Hermione's feet. She stumbled backwards and nearly fell. "What? Why didn't you tell me?"

She started towards the door, and Draco caught her by the arm and wrenched her back. When she tried to break away, he pinned her against the door, his expression furious. "This—this is why I wasn't going to tell you. You idiot, you'll throw yourself into a trap."

She stared at him, and a cold sinking sensation came over her. Her fingers closed around his wrist as she stared at him, disbelieving. "You intercepted me and brought me here so I couldn't go back."

Draco's expression was hard. "That wasn't the Dark Lord's entire army at Hogwarts. He's been concentrating the troops here for the last month. Once the reports regarding the attack at Hogwarts came in, it was clear your safe houses would be vulnerable. Where do you think the rest of the army was sent?" Hermione felt devastation flood through her, as though she were bleeding to death from it. "You kept me here, unconscious, for hours." Her voice was raw with grief and betrayal. "I could have gotten them out if you'd given me a chance."

Draco's expression was cold and unapologetic. "You couldn't have saved them. You would have died or been captured along with everyone else."

"Well, we won't know now, will we? Since you never gave me a chance—" Her voice broke.

His mouth twitched, and he looked away. His hand rested lightly on her shoulder. "I only had time to get you away. I left my post when I realised you were at Hogwarts, I didn't have enough time to do anything more."

Her jaw kept trembling, and her chest was jerking as she tried to breathe and not cry. "I was going to get Ginny. I have to get her, that's not negotiable. I won't leave without her. She was in one of the most protected safe houses. They might not have broken in yet."

Draco was unmoved.

"I won't leave without Ginny." Her voice was hard, and she met his eyes. "You can't make me leave without her."

His eyes flickered, and his fingers on her shoulder twitched. "Fine. We'll disillusion and check."

Hermione swallowed and nodded.

She held Draco tightly as she side-along apparated him to a spot down the street from Grimmauld Place.

They were immediately struck by the sound of blaring sirens. The air was mangled with Dark Magic and the smell of burning. There were Muggle emergency vehicles filling the streets, their lights flashing.

Number Twelve Grimmauld Place was in ruins. The front of the house was split open, as though it had been bombed or pried apart. The houses adjoining it on each side were damaged and there were paramedics carrying bodies out. There were already dozens of bodies lined up in the street; pedestrians, the Resistance fighters who stood guard at Grimmauld Place, several nurses and healers who had been in the foyer as Hermione had left.

Part of magic over the house still held, the Muggle emergency responders would move towards Number Twelve then stop and turn away, as though they were aware of the house but the Muggle repelling charms prevented them from approaching it.

Before Draco could stop her or apparate them away, Hermione bolted, ducking under the caution tape and running towards the door. The steps were split and uneven, and she stumbled as she made her way up them.

She heard Draco swear as he chased her. She flicked her wand, the spell blasted the remains of the door off its hinges and into the foyer. There was a thud and the sound of a falling body. Several

deadly curses shot out from inside. Hermione dropped and rolled to the side. *"Morsmordre!"* She heard Draco snap, and she watched as the Dark Mark slid through the opened door and filled the foyer.

He pulled off his disillusionment and stepped into Grimmauld Place. Hermione stayed frozen at the door. There were dozens of bodies on the floor; all the injured that had been sent from Hogwarts to Grimmauld Place.

"Beg pardon, sir, we thought it was Order members," a lanky, vicious-faced man unfolded himself from the shadows at the sight of Draco.

"I gathered that," Draco bit the words out; his expression was of cold fury. He turned to survey Grimmauld Place. "I want a report on the building."

The man scratched his head with the tip of his wand. "We got a few dozen who fled from Hogwarts. Sent 'em all back." His mouth twisted into a cruel, satisfied smile. Several more Death Eaters appeared, emerging from rooms further in the house. "Once the runners stop coming, we'll inventory the building."

He kicked a hospital cot, and limp body fell off onto the floor. "When we finished with the ones outside, there was nothing much but the healers and near-dead. Finished off the dying and sent the prisoners to the Warden." He rested his foot on the body and rocked it.

Draco stood expressionless.

"There's a war room we found upstairs after we swept the building." The man gestured with his thumb. "Extra wards, took a bit of work to get in."

"Show me," Draco said.

They started up the stairs and were halfway up it when Draco suddenly whirled, his wand flashing. There were lights from a dozen rapid spells and the men surrounding him all froze for a moment before they dropped dead. Draco glanced back towards the door, and Hermione entered, stepping past the bodies, trying not to let herself look at any of them.

There was a tiny figure slumped at the foot of the stairs; Dobby's enormous blue eyes stared blankly where he lay fallen. Hermione looked away. The stairs rocked as she quickly ascended them, passing Draco, heading towards Ginny's room.

The door was blasted open, and Padma's body was fallen, facedown, across the doorway. A pool of black liquid was seeping out from what was left of her. Hermione's foot shook as she stepped over Padma's body and stared into the empty room.

"They must have taken her to Hogwarts," her voice was shaking. "We—we'll have to get her out of Hogwarts." There was a gurgling sound behind her. Hermione turned sharply, wand drawn, and saw Padma move.

"Mione?" Padma shifted and lifted her head part-way up.

Hermione stared in horror and dropped her disillusionment. The curse Padma had been struck by was dissolving her. It was almost impossible that she was still alive.

“Padma,” Hermione’s voice was broken, strangled as she rapidly cast a diagnostic. What remained of Padma’s organs were shutting down; the curse was minutes from her heart.

“Mione. They took—Ginny—to Sussex,” Padma said. Her voice was slightly garbled, and she coughed, the black liquid spilling out of her mouth and down her chin. “Ginny. Said—diseased—good subject.”

Hermione felt her throat close as violent, sickening horror swept through her.

Padma coughed again, and more acrid liquid spilled from her mouth. Hermione looked down at her; her heart felt like lead in her chest.

“Padma—I’m so sorry—” Hermione’s voice broke. “I can’t—I can’t heal this.”

Padma’s mouth twisted. “I know. Is Parv—?” She choked and coughed.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know where Parvati is.” Hermione touched Padma gently on the forehead, brushing a lock of hair from her eyes. “I’m sorry. I’ll get you potion. It’ll make it quick.”

Hermione started to move towards her potion cabinet.

“Don’t bother.” Draco stepped forward from where he’d been standing.

Padma’s expression was one of confusion and slow horror as Draco knelt beside her. Before Hermione could move, he rested the tip of his wand against Padma’s forehead.

*“Avada Kedavra.”* He said it in a quiet voice, as though he were speaking the incantation rather than casting it.

There was a flash of green light. Padma’s expression turned blank, and she went limp in the pool of her remains.

Draco stood and looked at Hermione, his expression cold.

Hermione stood frozen for a moment. “You have to mean an Unforgivable.”

“I never cared about the Resistance beyond that they were useful, and important to you.” His voice was indifferent. “It was quicker than a potion.”

She pressed her lips together and gave a small nod of acknowledgement as she knelt and gently closed Padma’s eyes. She drew her hand away from Padma’s face, standing and making her way towards her potion cabinet.

Ginny was in Sussex because of the spattergroit glamours.

She felt dazed with horror.

The cabinet had been broken into and searched. The potion stores were a shattered, smoldering heap on the floor.

She drew her wand and started tapping spells along the walls until all the carefully concealed compartments opened. She pulled everything out, slipping them into a old beaded bag she’d put an expansion charm on.

“Granger, we’re leaving.” Draco had appeared at the door. “I have to get all this,” she said in a sharp

voice. She gathered up all the potions she'd hidden. All the materials she had left over from the bomb. She put them all into her bag until there was nothing left. She pulled her knives out of the compartment in the floor.

"We're leaving now," he said, his hand closing around her arm. "Weasley is gone. The Resistance is gone."

He pulled her down the stairs and to the door of Grimmauld Place, his wand drawn. He disillusioned them both and apparated as soon as they were clear of the remaining wards.

They reappeared back in the shack.

"I have to get Ginny," Hermione said the moment they landed. She dropped to her knees and started rummaging through everything she'd brought.

"She's in Sussex."

"I know. I have to get her." Her chest jerked, and she fought to keep her voice from wavering. "Oh, god—" The words were a low sob, and her hands were shaking as she fought to stay calm. "We have to go now. You—you can use me—take me there as a prisoner, and then once we're in, we can try to find her. Or—I can create a distraction, and you can get her."

Draco's eyes were ice. "She is in Sussex. Subjects don't leave that building alive."

Hermione shook her head. "I'm going to get her. If you won't help me, I'll just go by myself."

His expression grew murderous, and he stalked towards her. "It would be suicide. You said no rescues. The horcrux has to be the priority. If she's so diseased they took her straight to Sussex instead of processing her at Hogwarts first, she's not worth saving anyway."

Hermione swallowed. "Ginny is pregnant."

Draco froze. "She isn't diseased, she's pregnant, and I concealed it from the Order with glamours because —because it's Harry's baby." She was starting to shake. "If she's at Sussex—the glamours I used—they won't trick a diagnostic. They'll realise—and—and—" her chest started to spasm as she fought to breathe. "There are things Vold—that the Dark Lord could do with Harry's baby. Draco—I have to get her."

Draco turned pale and stepped away from her. Hermione reached towards him.

"He—he could use the baby to make another regeneration potion," Hermione said. "It would —it could give him another ten years. I promised Harry that I would take care of Ginny and her baby. It was—it was the last thing I said to him."

Draco went still as though she'd petrified him.

"Please, Draco."

He wouldn't look at her.

"Draco, I have to get Ginny back." She swallowed and forced herself to draw a deep breath. "I will—never ask anything of you after this. But—I have to get Ginny."

She tried to touch him, but he flinched away from the contact. "Granger—" His voice was cold.

Unyielding.

*I'll take care of them, as long as I live.*

Anything.

"I'll leave the war," she said, her voice desperate. "I'll stop—everything. If you get Ginny for me, I'll do anything you want, I swear. I'll leave. I'll never come back. Whatever you want— anything you ask—if you get Ginny for me."

She touched the back of his hand, silently begging him to look at her.

She was met with silence.

She could almost feel Draco weighing it, evaluating her offer.

"Will you?" he finally said, turning to look at her, his eyes intent.

She met his gaze and gave a short nod. "I will."

He studied her, his eyes narrowed and calculating. "Those are your terms? The Weasley girl, and you'll go?"

"I'll go. I swear."

His eyes flickered, triumph and something—something else. He looked across the room and nodded slowly. "Alright. If those are your terms, I'll get her for you."

Hermione gave a low gasp as relief flooded over her. Her chest jerked, but she forced herself to stay composed. "Thank you. Thank you—Draco."

The corner of his mouth quirked.

Hermione squared her shoulders and studied him. "What do you need me to do?"

He eyed her and his expression twisted derisively. "Stay here."

She drew her chin down and furrowed her eyebrows as she stared at him. "Are you sure? I brought some things"—she gestured towards her bag—"I could—"

"It will draw less attention if I enter alone," he said, cutting her off sharply. "If you want me get her out, you'll stay here and let me work without succumbing to your desperate need to insert yourself into everything." His tone was cool and every word clipped.

He walked over to the far corner in the room and traced a series of runes into the wall. He slid his fingers across the wood paneling until there was a click. He pulled, and the wall shifted away, revealing a large selection of weaponry and dark artifacts.

He pulled several items off the wall and slipped them into his robes before turning to look at her again, his expression cold.

"I'll be back within an hour. Stay here."

That was all he said before he vanished. Hermione waited. She organised the contents of her bag. She went through Draco's healing supplies.

She ignored the weight in her chest. If she paid attention to it, it would crush her to death.

If she didn't keep herself preoccupied, she suspected her guilt would swallow her whole.

She was leaving everyone behind. The Order, The Weasleys, DA, The Resistance. She was leaving them all behind.

*"Do you really think we'll just die? Angelina, they're not going to shut down Sussex when they win the war. We're livestock. You didn't see the prisoners they brought from the last curse division. They were—They were dissolving, rotting, skinned and still alive, there were things crawling inside them—The ones that could still speak begged me to kill them."*

She was leaving them to that. The lucky ones might die under interrogation, but Sussex would be the fate of everyone else.

Her stomach wrenched, and she pressed her hands over her mouth as she struggled not to panic or vomit. She couldn't think about it. She couldn't. Draco couldn't risk his cover by trying to save them.

He and Severus were crucial for finding the remaining horcrux. Trying to get anyone at Hogwarts out would endanger the Order's only hope of actually defeating Voldemort.

Once Ginny was safely away, the horcrux had to be the priority.

Her hands shook, and she rummaged through Draco's supplies until she found a Draught of Peace.

The air moved, soundless, and Draco reappeared in the middle of the room, Ginny's limp body in his arms.

The glamours on Ginny's skin and stomach were gone.

Hermione flung herself across the room, pulling Ginny away from Draco and running dozens of diagnostics on her as she knelt on the floor, gripping her tightly in her arms.

There was no trace locked around either of Ginny's wrists.

"What happened? Did you knock her out? Where was she when you found her?"

"She was in a lab. They'd just removed the glamours when I arrived. I contained it." Draco's voice was calm. Flat.

Hermione cast a diagnostic on Ginny's stomach and watched the large, fluttering light with relief. Ginny's unconscious expression was frozen terror. She'd been dosed with a type of temporary stasis potion. Hermione cast several more spells to ensure nothing had been done to her.

"Once you've confirmed she's unharmed, we need to go. It will take a few hours to get you to the safe house and ensure everything is arranged."

Hermione was anxiously examining her diagnostics, but it slowly bled into her subconscious that there was something unnerving about Draco's tone. Hermione looked up at him.

There was a long burn along his jaw, and he was staring down at Hermione with an expression that was both wistful and starved.

The way Harry had looked at her.

There was a dropping sensation in her chest as she realised it.

“What is it?” She laid Ginny’s unconscious body on the floor and stood, reaching for him as she cast a diagnostic. “What’s wrong?” The corner of Draco’s mouth twitched, and then it curved into a thin smile as she drew closer and her fingers ghosted along his jaw.

He stared down at the floor for a moment before looking up and meeting her eyes. “I’ve blown my cover getting the Weasley girl out for you.”

Hermione stood frozen, her wand slipped from her fingers and clattered to ground. “What?”

She tried again. “You—you what?”

She looked into his eyes, certain she was misunderstanding him. But it was in his eyes.

He was saying goodbye to her. He was going to die.

She shook her head slowly. “No.”

It was like the moment in Cambridge when he’d activated the artifact, and all the oxygen vanished. No air. No sound. Just silence.

The quiet space between slowing heartbeats, until the moment when the heart didn’t beat again.

It was that sound. The negative space. The sound of nothing.

“No,” she said again.

“There wasn’t any other way.”

“No.” Her heart had started to beat again. Faster and faster.

“I told you, there are extensive counter-espionage measures in place. There are records that I was there, that I entered labs with highly-controlled access. I could hardly burn down the building and fight my way out carrying an unconscious and pregnant witch. Tomorrow— when the guard duty is switched over to a new shift, the lab will be found. The records will show that I was the only one who left alive.”

She shook her head. “No.”

“We should go now.”

“No. Draco—we can go back.” She turned towards her bag. “There must be a way to destroy the records—I can—“

He gripped her by both arms and pulled her back, his expression set. “You made the deal, Granger. I met your terms.” Hermione gave a low, pained sound in the back of her throat as he pulled her closer, looking in her eyes. His eyes were intent as he stared at her, as though he were memorising her because it was the last time he’d ever see her. There was also a sort of vicious triumph in them.

“Anything I wanted, if I went and got the Weasley girl for you; those were your terms.”

Her stomach had dropped until there was nothing but a chasm inside her. Her chest hurt as though

Draco had reached in and wrenched her heart out.

No. He couldn't die.

There were black spots beginning to appear in her vision as she stood staring at him.

No. She wouldn't let him.

“Draco…”

There was a cold rage trickling down her throat. It wasn’t an accident. He’d known. The calculation in his eyes the moment she made her offer. He’d known, and he’d taken it. He’d done it in order to get what he wanted, without giving her a chance to find a better option.

*Never make a deal with a devil, his price will always be more than you can pay.*

She stood mute and unable to breathe as she absorbed it.

Draco stood studying her for several more moments before his mouth curved into a faint smile. His hand rose up, and his knuckles grazed her cheek as he continued to study her.

“We had a good run, Granger, but we were never going to last.” The corner of his mouth twitched, and she felt him slip a curl behind her ear before his hand ghosted down to rest briefly at the base of her throat. “You knew that.”

“Draco, please let me—” she started, her voice shaking. She tried to back away, but he caught her arm.

His expression hardened again. “Anything I wanted. It was your deal.” Her lungs were beginning to burn. “Draco—Draco—don’t—don’t do this to me.”

“They were your terms, Granger. I met them. It’s time to go. You swore you’d leave.”

She tried to pull away from him, but she couldn’t breathe. Draco was beginning to swim in front of her eyes. The edges of him were blurring. He was speaking, but the words were growing rounded and difficult to decipher.

She tried to pull away again, but he was holding her too tightly.

Her hands and arms were beginning to prick painfully as though there were needles sinking into her skin. Draco pulled her closer and the set, determined expression on his face was beginning to shift into worry.

“Granger—breathe.” The edges of him were fading into black. His eyes were becoming tense and worried. He shook her slightly. “Hermione—don’t—come on—breathe—Hermione.”

She couldn’t breathe. She was going to lose him.

Her fingers grasped at the fabric of his robes as she swallowed and tried to speak.

“Draco—” her voice was broken, “—don’t do this to me.”

The devastation swallowed her like a tidal wave, and Draco vanished into its darkness.

When she regained consciousness, Draco was leaning over her once again. She stared up at him.

There was the taste of something bitter and herbal in her mouth. Her whole body felt numb and her brain sluggish.

She blinked, trying to think. Everything came rushing back with almost violent anguish.

She'd passed out from shock and a lack of oxygen.

She swallowed, and her tongue tingled. He'd dosed her with a sedative while she was unconscious, so she'd be pliant and cooperative.

She stared up at him as she tried to find words.

"I'm never going to forgive you for this," she finally said. The words were vaguely slurred, giving the sentence an irregular lilt, as though her mouth wouldn't quite cooperate with her.

Draco didn't flinch, his hand ghosted along her cheekbone. "You'll be alive and away from the war. Those—were always my terms."

Hermione pressed her lips together for several seconds as she tried to think through the potion clouding her mind. Whatever he'd given her, it had been a large enough dose that she was surprised she'd managed to regain consciousness. The fact he'd dosed her while she was passed out meant the potion had activated fully before she was conscious to fight against it.

There was a cold rage seething through her that she couldn't quite reach.

She forced herself to think slowly.

*The fanfare is in the light, but the execution is in the dark.*

It was theoretically possible for an occlumens to make themselves immune to any mind-altering potions, although it was preferable if they were conscious at the time of dosage. Draco had likely known that fact and intentionally given it to her while she was unconscious because of it.

Veritaserum, sedatives, Love Potions, an occlumens could potentially wall them away if their mind was already compartmentalized enough. Hermione stared up at Draco as she laboriously gathered up the effects of the potion he'd given her and walled in it around the events of the day.

Her mind was suddenly crystal clear.

She studied him, calculating.

She could see all the emotion behind his carefully guarded eyes.

"If you force me to leave, and then you die, we may never find the horcrux," she said, still using the slow sedated lilt. His eyes flickered, and his expression grew cool. "If the Order had wanted to win, they should have made better choices. If the Dark Lord kills them all, perhaps they will finally realise the consequences of their ideology. I did everything that was asked, but I cannot save an army that will never be willing to pay the price that victory demands. I am sick of watching you try to pay it for them."

Hermione sat up slowly on the bed.

Draco stepped back and offered his hand. "We're going now."

“No.”

His eyes narrowed and grew flintlike. “Granger, you gave your word.”

Hermione clenched her jaw. “I know. I will go—per your demands, but I need to speak with Severus first. He’ll be the only one left who can find the horcrux, there’s—research I need to share with him.”

“No.” The word was snarled.

Hermione stared up at him, her expression deadened but determined. “You know I will always choose the Order first.”

He flinched. His mouth pressed into a hard line and his gaze dropped as he released a short breath and he stared at the floor. She saw his throat contract and the corners of his mouth twitch as he swallowed, his silver eyes looked away from her.

Hermione continued speaking. Slowly. Doggedly. “If you force me to leave without speaking to Severus, it could qualify as a violation of your Unbreakable Vow to aid the Order. You might just collapse and die before we get there.”

Draco looked at her sharply, and she met his gaze coldly and continued. “And—the last thing you will do is betray me. If you let me do this, maybe someday I’ll be able to forgive you.” He stared at her, and she didn’t blink until he wavered.

“Fine.” His voice was bitter, and he looked away from her again.

She nodded slowly and stood up, reaching for her wand and tapping twice on the charm on her wrist.

While they waited, she crossed the room to re-examine Ginny.

“You should take Ginny first,” she said after several minutes. “The stasis she’s under is going to last a few more hours, I don’t have the materials to make the counter-potion, and it will be difficult if she wakes up and I have to explain everything to her here before we go. Especially when I’m drugged like this.”

Draco gave a low scoff in the back of his throat. “You expect me to leave you here with Snape?”

Hermione shrugged. “She’s pregnant, and when she wakes up she’s going to find out that Harry is dead and her entire family is lost. I won’t have much time to say goodbye to you if I’m calming her.”

There was a muffled crack outside. Draco turned to open the door. Hermione wondered if she could move fast enough to stun him. She shifted, and he immediately looked back at her.

Severus stepped through the door and looked back and forth between them. His mouth curled into a sneer, but she saw a subtle flood of relief in his eyes.

“Of course, I should have realised you somehow had her when she wasn’t ever brought to Hogwarts.”

Hermione slid her hands behind her back and curled them into painfully tight fists. “Do they have everyone then?”

Severus gave a infinitesimal nod. “Gabrielle Delacour was secretly caught a week ago. They used her to lure out Fleur.”

Hermione shook her head slowly. “Fleur would never—”

All the safe houses.

Fleur had known every one. She’d warded and maintained them.

Hermione shook her head again. “She wasn’t the secret keeper. That couldn’t have been enough.”

Severus‘ mouth twisted derisively. “With Sussex’s endless ingenuity, the impossible becomes possible. Something related to the way Veela channel their magic it would seem. They’ve been working for months to perfect breaking through the Fidelius.” The acidic disdain in his voice was muted. He looked tired.

She wondered if he were carrying equal despair behind his own occlumency walls.

Severus stared at Hermione, his expression wary. “What happened at Hogwarts?”

Hermione dropped her eyes. “Harry was a horcrux. I found out today, after the attack had already started. When I confirmed it, I tried to convince Harry to have the Resistance fall back, but he thought if all the horcruxes were destroyed that letting the Dark Lord kill him would fulfill the prophecy and kill them both.”

Severus’ expression flickered. “Just how did you come to realise that?”

“Poppy told me she noticed irregularities in his signature during first year, but Dumbledore dismissed them.” She gave Severus a long look. “Did you know?”

His lip curled. “I did not. I wouldn’t have endeavored to teach him occlumency if I had been aware he had a horcrux in his head.”

Hermione gave a small nod. “Well, it hardly matters now. He’s dead, and it didn’t work. We missed a horcrux, and we have to find it.” Her jaw twitched, and her voice grew tight. “Draco blew his cover getting Ginny out of Sussex. He expects he has less than twelve hours before the Dark Lord learns of his betrayal.”

Severus looked sharply at Draco, who stared back with an indifferent expression.

Hermione swallowed. “I agreed to leave Britain and take Ginny to safety. Severus, you’ll have to be the one to find and destroy the last horcrux. My research was lost in Grimmauld Place, but I can explain everything before I go.”

Severus’ expression didn’t so much as flicker. “Indeed, and what will Draco be doing?”

Hermione steeled herself. “He’s going to take Ginny to the safe house first and get everything arranged while I’m giving my research to you. Then he’s going to take me and return.”

Severus gave an audible snort and looked at Draco. “Really? That’s your plan? And I’m expected to follow orders?”

Draco stared back, his lip curling viciously. “It doesn’t matter to me what you do. Granger is leaving.”

Severus arched an eyebrow and looked back at Hermione. “Really?”

The corner of Hermione’s mouth quirked down. “Yes. I gave him my word that I would go.”

Severus was silent for long enough that her heart began pounding in her chest.

He rolled his eyes. “Very well, given that I would seem to be the only one remaining who remembers the purpose of the Order.” Hermione conjured a table and then scrounged through her beaded bag for parchment and ink. She started writing and then looked up at Draco.

“You should take Ginny now. That way I’ll be there by the time she wakes. I’m assuming it’s not a quick trip to wherever you’re hiding us.”

Draco was staring at her, his eyes calculating. “I don’t trust you, Granger. I trust Snape even less.”

Hermione’s heart stalled, but she just blinked slowly. “Alright. Stay then.”

She looked back down at the scroll and resumed writing. There was a long silence.

“I want an Unbreakable Vow,” Draco said abruptly.

Hermione’s fingers twitched before she looked up at him. “From me?”

Draco sneered. “No. Not from you. From Snape. I want his word that he won’t interfere or take you anywhere.”

Hermione looked over at Severus, her heart pounding heavily in her chest. “Alright. Do you want me as Bonder?”

“You are both fools,” Severus said, drawing himself up.

“Will you do it?” Draco’s eyes were narrowed into slits.

Severus gave Hermione a sidelong look and then snorted. “Of course, I will make an Unbreakable Vow,” he gave a dismissive wave of his hand, “given that it is the only way to get anything done.”

It was made in a matter of minutes.

Draco didn’t look at Severus as he extracted the vow, his eyes were locked on Hermione.

Then Draco stood, his eyes still on her face.

“I’ll be back in a few hours.” He picked up Ginny. Just before he vanished, Hermione’s lips parted.

To say—

To say—

“Alright. I’ll be waiting for you,” she said, turning back to the table she’d been writing at and picking up the quill again.

She didn’t look up as he apparated silently away. The moment he vanished, she dropped the quill and looked up, staring frozen at the place he’d disappeared from. She half-expected him to reappear.

He didn’t.

Her fingers tapped on the table for a few moments, and then she turned and walked past Severus, snatching her bag up from the floor and using her wand tip to carve runes into the floor. The trapdoor glowed and appeared. She knelt down and began pulling supplies out.

Severus was silent as she began emptying several glass vials and then charming them into a multitude of delicate glass spheres.

She pulled a cauldron from her bag and conjured an intense flame beneath it before upending an entire keg of powdered silver from Draco's supplies into it.

"I never imagined Draco could be so easily fooled."

Hermione's jaw twitched as she pulled a flagon of resin out.

"He has always wanted to get me away from the war more than anything else." She was quiet for a moment before she added, "I told you before, my life is important to him. And—in spite of himself, he doesn't want me to hate him. I suppose you could say he has predictable weaknesses now."

She pressed her lips together and her throat tightened. "I've never broken my word to him, he trusts me to keep my word."

"He'll never trust you again when he discovers you lied to him."

Hermione didn't look up from her work. "No. I don't suppose he will."

"Are you going to tell me what you're planning? Off to kill the Dark Lord yourself?"

The corner of her mouth quirked downwards as she shook her head. "I'm going to blow up Sussex."

There was a long silence. "Really?"

Hermione shrugged a shoulder. "It's theoretically possible, and I don't have an abundance of options at the moment."

"You intend to kill everyone in that building to save Draco?"

Hermione started dripping resin into dozens of the spheres. Her hands were steady, her focus razor sharp.

"I need Draco to live. I can't—I need him to live." She swallowed and lifted her chin. "Besides, there's almost no one to save in that building. I tried to save the victims from the last curse division, and I couldn't. They all died." She pulled out box filled with over a hundred vials of highly concentrated poison. Aerosolised, a drop was enough to kill a room. "I can make it quick for everyone there. That—was the best I could do the last time."

She measured several drops into every glass sphere.

"If I blow up Sussex, I can save Draco, spare the victims whatever else would happen to them, and—I can kill the scientists working there. Maybe Dolohov will even be there. Tom probably won't build a whole new lab again now that Harry is dead. He won't have enough scientists to restaff to that scale, even if he wanted to. Which will mean he can't send everyone imprisoned at Hogwarts there. I'm sure he'll come up with something else—but at least he won't be able to have them all tortured to death in order to further his cause."

Severus was silent for several minutes.

“So—that’s my plan. You should probably leave,” Hermione said without looking up. “I’ve never made these types of bombs before. I may blow this building up.”

“I’m sure it will be a much quicker death than what Draco will do if he returns and finds his safe house destroyed. Is this a suicide mission for you then, or are you intending to come back?”

Hermione sealed several glass spheres and placed them into larger spheres. “I have to come back. For Draco.”

“If you don’t come back, he’ll assuredly try to kill me.”

Irritation bloomed in the back of her mind, and her hold on a vial of crushed fire crab eggs tightened. “I’m sure you’ll come up with something, Severus. You’ve been a spy for almost as long as I’ve been alive.”

There was another long silence.

“If you don’t come back, what do you expect him to do?”

Hermione froze, and her occlumency walls wavered. “I’m going to come back. I told Draco I’d be here waiting for him.”

Severus didn’t say anything else. He just stood watching her in disapproving silence.

She made dozens of bombs, each no larger than a snitch and encased every one of them in silver before dipping them into her invisibility potion and storing them inside the countless pockets in her cloak.

Then she stood, picked up the paper on the table and folded it in half, starting to put it away into her bag before hesitating and putting it back. She pulled out her knives and slipped them both into an empty pocket in her cloak.

She glanced over at the mess of bomb materials scattered across the floor. “Don’t touch anything. I’ll clean up when I get back. I’m off now.” Severus looked her up and down carefully. His onyx eyes inscrutable. “How are you intending to get there?”

Hermione’s heart was pounding violently in her chest despite the sedative, but she lifted her chin, her mouth quirking in the corner. “You took me to Ashdown once for foraging. I used to go there every week until the wards kept me out.”

Severus stared at her for another moment and extended his hand. “Give them to me. I’ll do it.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. She hesitated for a moment before she gripped the fabric of her cloak and shook her head. “I promised Draco I’d leave and not come back. If this doesn’t work and Draco—” her voice cut off briefly. She studied the floor. “There has to be someone to find the horcrux. Besides—these”—she gestured down at her cloak—“I didn’t have much time. They’re sloppy, I have to activate them.”

His eyes narrowed. She squared her shoulders and began to turn towards the door. As she pulled the door open, her fingers twitched, and she glanced over her shoulder. Severus was standing and watching her warily.

“Severus—” she started, her voice wavered. She looked away, swallowed, and started again. “Severus, if I don’t come back, tell Draco—Tell Draco that I—”

Her head dropped down, and she quickly brushed her fingertips across her cheeks. She cleared her voice and shook her head. “Never mind. I imagine he knows.”

She set her jaw as she pulled the door open, stepped through, and apparated.

*Flashback 38*

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: This is the final flashback chapter.

**July 2003**

Sussex Lab was a huge black building that looked as though it had been dropped down into the middle of the Ashdown Forest. The apparition wards extended several hundred yards. Hermione approached under heavy disillusionment, giving wide berth to the other, smaller buildings scattered about it. The Lab overshadowed everything. The air was so twisted and corrupted with Dark Magic it was difficult to breathe. Dementors were patrolling high overhead.

From the angle of her approach, the building reminded Hermione of the pictures of Azkaban. She'd seen the blueprints of Sussex design and seen it from a distance, but it was the first time she'd approached it.

It was a towering, V-shaped building, with no visible point of entry. There were only a handful of windows on the uppermost floors. She knew from the blueprints that the only entry was by a secured apparition point inside the building, and the only exit a separate disapparition point on a different floor.

If she'd been calmer and less grief-stricken, she would have realised there was no way for Draco to extract Ginny so quickly without compromising himself.

They'd both made mistakes out of desperation.

She glanced around. It was evening and overcast for summer. It was beginning to grow dim; the dark creatures would soon emerge in force.

Hermione approached until she reached the final layer of protective wards. They were the same impenetrable kind that had been over Hogwarts. The grass and plants had burned away into ash along the perimeter.

Hermione held her hand out, and the magic crackled, shimmering into visibility at her proximity.

She pulled a knife out of her cloak and, kneeling down, pierced the wards near the ground. The manticore venom in the silver slipped through as though the magic didn't exist. Hermione pulled one of the dozens of bombs she'd brought, tapped it lightly with the tip of her wand, and pushed it through the opening, being careful not to let the ward or the knife come in contact with the tiny orb. If she accidentally set off a bomb, the Death Eaters would be picking up bits and pieces of her across a fifty foot radius.

She tried not to think about it.

She pushed five of the bombs through the opening in the ward and, with a flick of her wand,

levitated the bombs over to the building, leaving three interspersed along the base and sending two to hover about twenty feet up the wall. She withdrew the knife, and the opening in the ward instantly resealed. She quickly moved ten feet further and repeated the steps until she had made her way all the way along the east wall of the building and her pockets were empty. Based on every report Severus and Draco had ever brought about Sussex, the east side of the the building was where the curse development division and most research using human test subjects were located. The west side of the building was more technological, where the shackles and research into breaking the Fidelius had been based.

She backed away as far as she could, eyeing the edge of the disapparition wards and trying to gauge how far she'd need to run. With a quick flick, she cast a bubble-head charm on herself.

She closed her eyes and drew a slow breath before opening them and extending her wand hand.

*I'm going to take care of you. I'm always going to take care of you.*

She waved her wand sharply upwards and then slashed down.

There was a split second of silence. Then there was a rumble, as though the particles in the air were all vibrating.

The sound struck her like a wall, and her bones vibrated. The wards over Sussex rippled into view as rapid series of blasts zipped down the side of the lab. The air shattered in a deafening explosion. The blast slammed into the wards and then ricocheted back into the base of the Sussex Lab. A cloud of dust and deadly poison filled the air, and the entire east side of the building wobbled and then fell, toppling back and crashing into the west side of the building.

The ground shook so powerfully Hermione was thrown off her feet. Her head struck the ground, and pain caused her occlumency walls to waver. The dazed, drugged sensation seeped into her consciousness as she pushed herself to her feet. She shook her head, blinking and trying to clear her mind. There was a sharp, painful ringing in her ears that muted all other sound. She glanced back at the lab before bolting towards the anti-apparition point.

She had made it fifty feet when a freezing despair came over her.

She stumbled and faltered.

Harry had died. All the grief abruptly struck her like a tidal wave.

Harry. Padma. Dobby. Everyone.

Everyone.

Everything she'd done. None of it mattered.

It had all been pointless. Harry's blank eyes as he was struck with Killing Curse after Killing Curse. Ron screaming. Throwing himself towards his best friend desperately.

*"Is Parv—?"*

Colin's screaming as he was flayed on the hospital bed. There was no point.

*"We had a good run, Granger, but we were never meant to last."*

She stood in the heath and shook. A tidal wave of death washed over her.

They were all going to die.

She sank to the ground. She was so cold, and everything hurt.

She pressed her hand against her chest and tried to breathe.

*"You must know, you're reaching the point where the damage is becoming irreversible."*

All the memories she tried to hide from. All the screaming and dying. The putrid, tongue-curdling smell of gangrene and rot. Burning flesh. Bowels and insects and poisoned blood. Clawed hands gripping blindly towards her— *"Help." "Kill me." "Please." "Make it stop."*

Her whole body ached with cold, as though there was frost spreading across her fingers.

She wanted to die.

Draco. *"You're mine. I'll always come for you."*

She stilled. She'd told him she'd be waiting for him.

If she didn't go back, he'd return to find a mess of hastily assembled explosives and her scrawled note on the table. *I love you. I love you. I love you.* She forced her head up and realised there were Dementors, filling the sky and closing in on her. She gripped her wand and tried to stand. She couldn't cast a patronus. She had to run.

She stumbled to her feet and then collapsed again, shivering violently.

The descending Dementors were gathered so closely around her they blocked out all light.

She pushed herself up again, racking her mind for something to use. Something that wasn't poisoned by the war.

*"I'm going to take care of you. I'm not going to let anyone hurt you. You don't have to be lonely. Because you're mine."*

It wasn't happy. She wasn't sure what it was. But it was hers, a promise Draco had made to her. She had to get back to him. He was hers. She'd earned him. She'd promised she'd be waiting for him.

She couldn't die. She couldn't leave him behind. He'd crawl through hell to get her back.

Her skin was burning from the agonizing cold. She pushed herself up and pointed her wand towards the Dementors closing in on her.

*"Expecto Patronum!"* She poured every drop of emotion she had into the spell.

White light exploded from her wand, growing larger and larger until her patronus fully corporealised. Not her otter. Not a blur. Hermione stared up as a full sized Antipodean Opaleye emerged from her wand. It filled the sky. It threw back its head, roaring and unfurling enormous wings. It opened its mouth, and white flames poured from it.

The Dementors retreated up into the sky, but the dragon flew after them in pursuit, driving the Dementors higher and higher until they doubled back and flew down towards the field. Hermione stood up and watched them approach as she slashed her wand upwards.

Dementors may not die, but they could surely burn.

The fiendfyre curse, an inferno of molten flame poured from her wand, twisting and writhing as it morphed and corporealised into dozens of chimeras as the Dementors flew down, fleeing from her patronus. As the Dementors neared the ground, Hermione directed her wand skyward and the fiendfyre roared up, morphing into a wall of flame.

The whole sky was filled with screaming, burning Dementors being set aflame and eaten as the fiendfyre shifted and morphed into an enormous glowing dragon.

Hermione watched for only a moment before she ended the spell and turned to run as the burning Dementors dropped screaming from the glowing sky.

She made it a dozen yards when something tackled her to the ground. She kicked herself free and snarled a curse before the attacking vampire managed to bite her. It collapsed to the ground as she scrambled up. She was halfway to her feet when a hag suddenly leapt toward her face. Hermione threw herself to the side, casting a disembowelment hex as she did so. The field was filling with dark creatures. An army of them had descended on her while she'd been trying to escape the Dementors.

She paused until they were close and then slammed her wand into the ground, liquefying the earth around herself and watching as hags, vampires, and werewolves were swallowed by it. Before they could swim to the surface, she cancelled the curse and flung herself toward the edge of the wards again.

Someone struck her from behind. She went flying and twisted, rolling, catching herself and then finding her feet, using the last bit of momentum to help her regain her balance. She cast a bombarda maxima without looking to see who she was attacking.

A young werewolf looked down and found himself with his stomach blown open. He dropped to the ground. With his lycanthropy, he would probably manage survive. She sent several rapid slicing hexes at the throats of hags and werewolves that had gotten too close.

As she was turning to run again— *"Expelliarmus!"*

Her wand was wrenched away as the force of the spell flung her backwards. She landed heavily, and her head clipped a stone. Her vision swam, and black spots flashed in front of her eyes as she dazedly pushed herself up and looked in the direction her wand had gone.

Graham Montague was standing fifteen feet away, staring at her. Her wand in his hand. "Today is my day, I'll say. It feels like only yesterday I saw you," he said, smiling. His expression was gloating and intensely unnerving. "I didn't expect to find you this quick."

He gestured towards the smoking ruins of the lab and the burning Dementors still falling from the sky. "Manage all this by yourself?"

Hermione didn't move; her eyes were fastened on her wand.

"Fuck. I bet I'll get my Mark for bagging you." He looked back at her and then grinned as he gripped her wand in both hands and snapped it in half. She stared in horror. Without a wand, she couldn't apparate.

“Come on,” Montague pointed his wand at her and beckoned towards himself. The dark beings were gathered around him. “Don’t make this any harder for yourself. Come here, Mudblood.”

Hermione’s eyes swept across the field as she tried to calculate what to do.

She slumped, curling her shoulders submissively inwards as she slipped a knife out of the inner pocket of her cloak.

She walked hesitantly towards Montague and all the dark beings flanking him. A werewolf stepped forwards and started to seize her arm.

Hermione struck.

Her knife flashed. She cut off the hand and gutted the werewolf.

She’d healed enough hag injuries to know exactly what knife wounds couldn’t be fixed.

She dropped as a curse came streaking towards her, lunging for Montague. He was the closest person with a wand in his hand.

A hag leapt for her throat, and Hermione spun and buried her knife in its throat, before rushing towards Montague again.

Montague’s eyes widened in fear, and he tried to curse her. He was a far slower duelist than Draco. Sloppy and imprecise. She dodged the first curse. And the second. A purple curse clipped her cloak and caught her in the stomach. She kept moving towards him until he fell back, tripping as he tried to get away from her.

Flipping the knife in her hand, she flung it at him, aiming for the center of his chest. He cast a shield, but the magical blade sliced through it and sank to the hilt in his left shoulder. She’d barely missed his heart.

Hermione pulled out her second knife. His expression grew terrified. *“Avada Kedavra!”* He tried to cast the curse, but only sparks appeared.

*“Avada Kedavra!”*

Nothing.

*“Crucio!”*

The red curse missed her. He cast again.

As she buried her knife between his ribs, he jabbed her in the throat with his wand.

*“Crucio!”*

Her hold on the knife loosened, and she dropped to the ground, screaming. Her hands spasmed, and she writhed. The agony tore through every nerve. Her throat was being ripped apart. Her nerves mangled and flayed. The taste of blood filled her mouth. Pain. Nothing but utter pain.

Finally, it stopped. Hermione forced her eyes open and watched Montague drop to his knees, bleeding heavily from his side and shoulder. He appeared to be on the verge of passing out. His wand was dangling loosely from his fingers.

Hermione sobbed and gasped through her teeth as she shakily tried to roll over.

*Get his wand. Get his wand.*

Her muscles twitching and contracting as she dragged herself up.

"You fucking bitch… *Stupefy!"*

She woke to screaming.

She was on the ground, and her muscles spasmed and felt badly torn as she forced herself to sit up. She was in a large cage filled with more than a dozen other people, including a few she recognised vaguely.

It was nightfall, and the only illumination was torchlight, flickering orange. She could smell blood and Dark Magic. The screaming kept going on and on. There was laughter too. Cruel, taunting, hysterical peals of laughter.

She looked around and realised she was at Hogwarts. There were dozens of huge cages crammed with people scattered across the grounds of Hogwarts around the base of the Astronomy Tower. The screams were coming from the tower.

She looked up.

Hanging fifteen feet above the ground Molly Weasley was screaming, sobbing, and writhing where she hung from her wrists. Arthur screamed in agony beside her. A curse was slicing him apart, bit by bit. "Please! Not him!! Hurt me! He doesn't understand!! Please don't do this to him!" Molly's voice was broken as she begged. There were pieces of meat dangling from chains around Molly. Hermione squinted in the low light. Severed arms. A torso. George's head. Her throat contracted, and she doubled over and vomited so violently there was a tearing pain through her back as her body convulsed. She looked up again as she wiped her mouth. Bill, Charlie, Fred, and George were all dead, in pieces that dangled from the chains. Ron was still alive. Barely alive. Tonks was dead, her organs hanging down from her body. Remus hung beside her, so mangled he was surely dead too.

Above the Weasleys, Remus and Tonks, there was another figure. A skeletal corpse.

Hermione's fingers spasmed as she gripped the bars.

"Is—is that Harry?" she choked out.

"Yes," a girl nearby said dully. Hermione thought her name might have been Mafalda. "When You-Know-Who stopped using Killing Curses, he cast a spell, and Harry started rotting. He put him up there—so we'd all see it happen. And all his closest friends too. They've been torturing them for hours now."

Arthur's screams were growing fainter.

"Please!! Don't hurt him. Arthur. Arthur." Molly kept sobbing and begging as she tried to reach him. Hermione's fingers twitched, and she tucked her chin down and looked away from the tower.

Her cloak was gone, her necklace, her bracelet. She'd been stripped and redressed into a thin grey dress; even her hairpins and hair ties had been removed. Draco's ring still glittered on her hand.

“Malfoy!”

The blood in her veins ran cold, and she stiffened and turned. There were crowds and tents interspersed among the cages. Death Eaters, guards, and Ministry Officials were mingling and drinking. A Death Eater stepped forward and shot a curse up at the bodies hanging from the Astronomy Tower. There was drunken, braying laugher.

A few men were leering into the cages.

“You’re sweet. Perhaps the Dark Lord will give you to me as a favour,” a Death Eater was crooning as he tried to grab one of the prisoners through the bars.

“Malfoy!”

Hermione looked for Draco. She saw Lucius approaching instead.

“We thought you and the others might miss the whole celebration,” a ragged voice called out.

Hermione huddled low to the ground and averted her eyes as Lucius came closer. Her ears were still ringing from the explosion. She held her breath and strained to hear.

“The Dark Lord required my presence,” Lucius said, his voice was an unnerving, caressing drawl. “There was—an unexpected situation.”

Hermione felt her throat close. Draco.

The other voice dropped lower. “Sussex?”

“Indeed,” Lucius said quietly. “The Dark Lord is keen to keep it quiet. Only his most trusted.”

Hermione slumped in relief. Not Draco.

“Is it true then? Everyone?” The ragged voice was persistent.

“Did I not just say it’s being kept quiet? Do you want to know what the Dark Lord does not wish to be known?” There was a singsong quality within the softness of Lucius’ voice. “When he is concerned about spies in our midst? I should hate for him to learn you were heard prying. I still shudder to think of what happened to poor Rookwood last week.”

“I didn’t—I only meant to—polite inquiry was all I meant by it. Look! I save something for you. There were plenty who wanted to finish him, but I said you deserved the honors. Look, he’s still alive.”

Hermione glanced up and saw Lucius and the other Death Eater looking up at the Astronomy Tower.

Arthur had gone still, and Molly’s screams had turned to quiet sobs. “Still a few of them alive.” The ragged-voiced Death Eater shot a curse at Remus, and Remus’ body jerked and then went limp again. “That one won’t die. No matter what we throw at him. Regrown his organs twice now.” He sniggered. “Then there’s the mum. She screams louder for her spawn than when you crucio her. But I saved the best for you. Potter’s best friend, the one who was always with him. I made sure no one killed him.”

“How very thoughtful you are, Mulciber.” Lucius crooned the words as he studied the Weasleys

overhead.

His face grew drawn and thoughtful. His features were almost skeletal, the skin tightly pulled over his skull, and the hollows of his cheeks and eye sockets were sunken, almost black holes in the darkness and flickering torchlight. “I had hoped to have more time to savor the experience—but the Dark Lord wants them dead before the day’s end.” Lucius’ voice was wistful. “I have devoted some thought to just how I should go about it.”

A sickly yellow curse shot from Lucius’ wand and struck Ron on the side of the head. Ron’s body started jerking, and his eyes widened and bulged out, as though he were suffocating.

“Don’t—” the word was halfway to Hermione’s lips before she bit it back.

Lucius’ grey eyes were glittering as he stared up at the bodies strung overhead.

“I made a vow at Narcissa’s grave that I would kill every blood traitor in this country. I knew Potter belonged to the Dark Lord, but I hoped to be the one to send the rest of Potter’s beloved ‘family’ after him.”

Lucius flourished his hand, but the movement was spasmodic, as though it were a tic he had. His expression tightened as he stared up at Ron and, with a wave of his wand, ended the curse suffocating him. Ron gasped raggedly. His chest heaving. His eyes deadened.

Lucius waved his wand in lazy spirals and spoke slowly. “Burning is a particularly painful death. The Muggles used to burn witches. Burn them until there was nothing left to recover. All I have of my wife is an empty tomb. There was nothing left of her. Although I looked— many times.” His hand flourished again.

“It’s fitting, I think, that you know the pain she did.” He raised his wand. “This is for my wife.”

A dark green curse flew up and struck Ron on his foot. Smoke curled up, and Ron flung his head back and screamed as it spread up his leg.

Hermione’s body shook; her throat contracted as she tried not to vomit. She knew the curse. It turned blood to molten lead inside the body. It was a slow curse. She pressed herself against the far side of the cage and tried not to sob.

Lucius threw back his head and laughed.

Molly jerked and roused herself. “Please. No! Not my son. Please don’t hurt my son!!” Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and covered her ears, but she couldn’t block out Ron and Molly’s screams. Or Lucius’ laughter.

The screaming was gradually growing quieter when something warm and cloyingly sweet met Hermione’s nose. Her eyes snapped open to find Dolores Umbridge’s face merely inches from hers, studying Hermione with vicious glee through the bars of the cage. Umbridge was flanked by several guards.

“I believe I recognize that deceitful little face.” Umbridge gestured to a guard. “You, open it and grab her.”

There was the shriek of the cage door, and a hard hand caught hold of Hermione’s arm and dragged

her out. Fingers tangled in her hair as her head was wrenched cruelly back.

Umbridge gave another small laugh, and it ghosted across Hermione's face, warm and sugary as though she'd been eating candy only a moment before.

"It is you. I would know that filthy face of yours anywhere. I haven't forgotten you." Umbridge's eyes were glinting. She gestured over her shoulder. "Make a note. I want her transferred to Sussex, next batch they ask for, top of the list, for Dolohov personally." She leaned closer to Hermione, and her voice was almost a whisper. "He's always looking for new toys to break."

One of the guards coughed slightly. Umbridge looked sharply at him.

"Warden, Sussex is—they're saying it's permanently out of commission—due to the—the accident there. And Dolohov's—dead."

Hermione felt a flush of triumph through her terror as Umbridge's face fell.

She'd hoped Dolohov would die. The only person she hated more than Antonin Dolohov was Voldemort.

"It's confirmed then?" Umbridge's voice was sharp.

The guard gave a reluctant nod.

Umbridge sighed and looked disappointed. "Pity."

She jabbed her wand against Hermione's sternum. *"Crucio."*

Hermione screamed, and her legs gave out. The hand in her hair held her in place. Her body was bathed in agony until her muscles began spasming so violently she thought her tendons might snap. She screamed until her throat was stripped raw and her voice faded into sobs; she hung in place as her body jerked and spasmed violently.

The spell didn't stop. Hermione could feel her brain scrabbling to escape; to break free of the agony. Just break. Just break.

No. She couldn't.

*"I am not fragile. I am not going to break. Please believe that about me."*

She hung in place, shaking in agony.

The spell finally stopped. Hermione was dropped heavily to the ground, her muscles still twitching. She felt as though she'd been torn into pieces. Whimpering sobs came from low in her spasming chest.

She forced her eyes open and stared up. She could see the Astronomy Tower over Umbridge's shoulder; Molly was dying. Umbridge studied Hermione on the ground and gestured over her shoulder again. "I want this one, once her magic is suppressed. I imagine she'll require my thorough interrogation. Put her back."

Umbridge giggled and began turning to leave.

Thorfinn Rowle paused as he was passing by. "You can't have that one, Warden." His voice was

slurred, and he gestured jerkily towards where Hermione lay on the ground. “I helped bring her from Sussex after they caught her. The Dark Lord said he wants her kept intact in case he decides to interrogate her himself. It’s on the transfer paperwork.”

Through the agony and shock her body was going into from the torture, Hermione felt her blood run cold.

Umbridge’s expression fell. “But they die so quickly when he does it.”

Rowle straightened and narrowed his eyes. “Doubting me, Warden? I can call the Dark Lord here, if you doubt the paperwork.”

Umbridge gulped, and her chin wobbled as she shook her head rapidly. “No. No. I would never disobey the Dark Lord. If he wants her intact, she will, of course, stay intact. This—” she gestured down at Hermione,“—was only a few minutes for her—defiance. I would never question orders from someone as important as yourself. My disappointment got the better of me.” Her voice grew simperingly sweet. “After all, you—are one of the Dark Lord’s most trusted.”

Rowle squared his shoulders, and his barrel-chest rose. He looked at Hermione and nudged her with his boot. “I doubt she matters. He’s got dozens more important—terrorists he plans to interrogate—if she ends up forgotten—” He shrugged. “No one will care what you do with her then.”

He gave a barking laugh and continued on his way. Umbridge looked back at Hermione in silence for several moments. “When her magic is suppressed, I’ll take care of her personally. We do want to be sure we follow our orders to the letter and she stays *intact* .”

Hermione was pulled off the ground and thrown heavily back into the cage.

She curled tightly on the ground as her body kept spasming and jerking, but she barely noticed. She was frozen with terror.

Voldemort had marked her for his personal interrogation. The mere thought had her more panic-stricken than anything Umbridge might want to do to her.

Her mind was filled with memories of Draco.

It was an almost impossible number of memories to try to occlude or misdirect from.

*If ever you’re under interrogation by a truly accomplished legilimens, you’ll never keep them out with the sheer strength of your mental walls. If you were a minor member in the Resistance, they’d probably just kill you rather than go to the effort of getting in. But you’re an Order member. Potter’s Golden Girl.*

*...If I hadn’t gotten you I would never have had a chance to encounter a brain organised like a filing cabinet.* She pressed her twitching fingers against her mouth and crammed herself into a corner of the cage as she struggled not to panic.

“Are you alright? She kept that curse on you for—I don’t even know how long.” A boy in the cage came over and put a hand on Hermione’s shoulder.

“I’m fine. Don’t bother me,” Hermione said in a tight, shaking voice as she jerked away from the

touch. “I need to think.”

She drew a deep breath, using her occlumency to force her attention away from the spasming pain in her body.

Voldemort would realise she was an occlumens. He would realise it and then tear her mind to pieces.

He’d find Draco.

Even if her death under interrogation was quick, Draco’s punishment for his betrayal would not be.

It would be a worse death than the one she’d tried to save him from by bombing Sussex.

It Voldemort found their relationship, he would likely use Hermione as a means of punishing Draco. That was what he’d done with Narcissa. He’d used what Draco cared about to torture him. Draco had always been more driven by his fear of what could happen to her than of what Voldemort would do to him.

She had to hide him. Bury the memories so deeply they’d never be found.

*A brain organised like a filing cabinet…*

She gathered all her carefully, meticulously examined and sorted memories of Draco, Ginny, and the hocruxes, and pushed them as far back in her mind as she could; she placed them in the furthest reaches of her memory; beyond her parents, beyond the very earliest memories she possessed. She pushed them all as far away from her consciousness as was possible.

Then—she hesitated and swallowed nervously, her tongue darting out to wet her lips. She squeezed her eyes closed and drew a shuddering breath as she moved through her mind again, tearing down all the walls she had built over the course of the war.

Her neatly compartmentalised life. All her separated emotions and memories. Her grief and devastation over her lost relationships with Harry and Ron. Her bitter, poisonous resentment towards the Order. All the things she’d pushed away and ignored in order to stay focused, to stay on mission. The things she’d hidden away and refused to think about in an effort to stay sane while she kept working.

Colin’s death. Colin. The first death. The way he screamed as his skin was sliced off his body, off his face, his eyes. Until he stopped screaming, and Hermione stood there, too devastated and guilt-stricken to look away, as he was carved away into a skeleton. Layer after layer.

All the victims from the first curse division that she’d spent months trying to heal and save. They died. Everyone died. And died. And died. They always died. She tried to save them, but in the end they always died. Harry had died. Ron. The Weasleys.

Her life was a graveyard.

She pushed it all into the forefront of her mind.

When Voldemort came, all he would find would be the endless death toll of the war, year after year. An unheeded voice in the hospital ward. Just a healer. All the Order meetings when she’d argued for lethal spells and been dismissed and scolded. She wasn’t a fighter. Just a healer. What did she

know?

Sussex would look like her revenge.

She was lost in her memories when the door of the cage shrieked, and she was roughly dragged out of the cage again. Cold metal clamped around each wrist, and she was pulled towards the castle. Everyone hanging from the Astronomy Tower was dead but Remus.

There was a flash of poisonous green light. As Hermione glanced back, she saw the Killing Curse sailing through the air. Remus finally went fully limp. The last of the Marauders. She was pulled through the hallways, only half-lucid through the jumble of trauma in her mind and the remaining physical pain from all the cruciatus. The hallways were stripped bare. There were a series of large iron doors that the guard had to pause and unbolt as he dragged her further and further into the bowels of the castle. Down into the dungeons, past the classrooms, past the wall that had concealed the Slytherin common room, through a heavy door into an unfamiliar hallway.

Umbridge was standing by a door. She gave a saccharine smile as she looked Hermione over.

“This is where we kept our problematic prisoners until transfer to Sussex. Without the wards on the castle, we can’t be too careful with a prisoner saved for the Dark Lord’s exclusive interrogation. I’m sure you’ll do quite well here until he thinks to call for you.”

Hermione was shoved into a small room, barely illuminated by the torchlight outside the cell. Stone walls. Straw in a corner. A chamberpot in another.

She turned as the door was being swung shut, then it suddenly stopped, and Umbridge stepped through, as though she were re-considering something.

Her eyes ran up and down Hermione.

“We must obey the Dark Lord’s commands, mustn’t we?” she said in a musing voice as she gestured at Hermione with her wand. “Intact. That’s very important. We don’t want you sitting down here gibbering like a loon, chattering away to yourself like a filthy little savage. Let’s keep you—very quiet.” The tip of a wand dug into the dip behind Hermione’s jaw, forcing her head up. *“Silencio.”*

Umbridge gave a small giggle, and her cloying, sugary breath brushed across Hermione’s face.

“You’ll understand soon enough.”

Then Umbridge turned and walked out the the cell. The door swung closed with a heavy thud, and in a matter of seconds even the torchlight outside the cell was gone.

Hermione was left in darkness and silence. She felt her way carefully to the corner with the straw and curled up into a tight ball. Her muscles were burning and spasming painfully. It was freezing in the dungeons, and her clothes were thin.

She kept blinking, and peering into the darkness, hoping that if she waited long enough, eventually she’d be able to make out a faint outline.

There was nothing, nothing but darkness.

Eventually she curled her head down and returned to her occlumency.

Except—it wouldn't— She tried again but her memories—

Moving through her mind was laborious. As though she was mentally weighted down and she could barely crawl through her mind with occlumency.

She froze with dawning horror. Her twitching fingers went to her wrists, feeling the metal locked around them as she tried to breathe calmly.

It had never occurred to her—with her magic suppressed she'd lost her ability to use occlumency. Her mind was locked in the exact state it was in at the moment the shackles were fastened around her wrists. A sea of trauma at the forefront of her mind, and Draco hidden so far away she could barely draw up a clear memory of him.

She pressed her hands against her mouth and forced herself to breathe.

She inhaled slowly. To a count of four. Exhale, through her mouth. To a count of six. In and out. Again and again.

She forced herself to think carefully. This was for the best. Voldemort would bring her in for interrogation and find a chaotic jumble of memories. If she were careful not to think about Draco, Voldemort might not be able to find him.

She wrapped her hands around her shoulders, shivering in the cold. She just—couldn't think about Draco. Not at all. She couldn't let herself.

Hold on. That was what she had to focus on. Hold on.

Her ring suddenly burned painfully.

Hermione gave a silent gasp and gripped her hand. Her ring burned again and again and again. Then the burning stopped.

Hermione twisted the ring around her finger. Draco might come for her, before Voldemort called her in for interrogation. She had to be ready.

He always came for her.

She couldn't let herself waste away.

"Hold on. Hold on, Hermione," she mouthed the words over and over.

She didn't know if it was merely hours or a day later when her ring burned again. She was in so much pain she barely felt it. Her body was screaming from the muscle damage of the cruciatus and the cold and her hunger. She could barely move. Regardless of whether she had her eyes opened or closed, all she could see was the dead. Harry dying before her eyes. Over and over. Ron's screams as he died. Colin. Molly and Arthur. The hospital ward. They were at the forefront of her mind, and there was nothing else to think about.

There wasn't any food. There was no water either.

She thought it had been a day, but she had no way to be sure. There was no sound outside, not even monotonous dripping. There was only endless silence and darkness.

Perhaps Umbridge intended to starve her to death.

Her ring burned again hours later, she pressed her hand against her chest. Several hours later she suddenly smelled food and half dragged herself across the floor. She found a plate with bread and some kind of meat and a large bucket of water.

Her muscles were still spasming so badly she nearly dropped the bucket while gulping down water.

After that meals appeared. Randomised. There never seemed to be any set amounts of time between them. Sometimes it felt like days. Other times it seemed like only a few hours had passed.

After what she thought had been a week, her body stopped burning and spasming. She forced herself to get up and explore every inch of the cell with her fingertips. The door was sealed with magic; there was no lock to pick even if she had anything but straw and a chamber pot. She sniffed at the air through the bars on the door in the hopes it might indicate something. The air was stale, wet, cold. Lifeless. She had hoped that if she just checked carefully enough, she'd find a loose stone in the wall; some secret compartment hiding a nail, or a spoon, or even a bit of rope. Apparently the cell had never held any problematic prisoners for very long. There were no scratches to mark time. No loose stones. Nothing. Nothing but darkness.

Her ring kept burning. Every time she'd give a small gasp of relief and start crying from the reassurance Draco was still alive somewhere.

Then she'd catch herself sharply. She couldn't think about it. She couldn't let herself think about Draco. If Voldemort got to her first, she couldn't have him in her mind when she couldn't occlude him. She used the barest, smaller bits of magic and pushed her memories of him further out of reach. As though she were an oyster, carefully burying each memory under the tiny layer of occlumency she could wield without activating the magic suppression.

Her ring kept burning, every day, with almost blistering intensity. The fiftieth time it burned, she set her jaw and pulled it off, hiding it carefully in the corner. Before three meals appeared she felt her way back across the cell and put it back on, terrified that if she wasn't wearing it, it would somehow disappear. It didn't burn again after that. She didn't know if it meant Draco somehow had known she had taken it off.

Or if he'd died.

She huddled in the corner of the cell, feeling the rough texture of stones in the darkness, and tried not to think.

She recited potion recipes in her head. Transfiguration technique. Reviewed runes. Nursery rhymes. Her fingers flicked as she mimicked wand techniques, mouthing the spell inflection. She counted backwards from a thousand by subtracting prime numbers. She massaged her damaged muscles into compliance and began working through the exercise regime she'd memorised. Push-ups, sit up, burpees. She found that she could slot her feet through the bars of the cell door and do crunches while hanging upside down. She taught herself to do handstands.

It helped turn her mind off. Counting. Pushing herself to new physical limits. When her arms and legs turned to jelly, she'd slump down into a corner and fall into a dreamless sleep. It was the only way to make the end of the war stop playing in front of her eyes.

Hold on, Hermione, she kept reminding herself when she was so cold and broken-hearted she didn't want to go on anymore. All there was in her head was death. Everyone screaming.

Sometimes she'd press both hands against the stones, draw her head back, and prepare to smash her forehead into the wall in the hopes of making it all stop.

But she always held herself back and then drew away.

"Hold on. You promised you wouldn't break."

She couldn't always remember why.

When she did remember, she pushed the thought away and forced herself to do something else. Calculate the cubic feet of her cell. More push-ups. Could she count backwards from a thousand all the way to zero before her next meal appeared if she doubled the subtracted number each time? Two thousand? She'd keep going until she was too tired to think anymore and then huddle in a corner and trace her fingers along the walls.

The walls were the only things she always knew she could find in the dark

"Someone will come for you. Someone always comes for you."

No one came.

Everyone was dead. She'd seen them die. No one was going to come for her.

The walls of her cell were all she had. Everything else was darkness.

# END OF BOOK TWO

*Manacled*